

Golden Jubilee Publication Series

Selected Stories
Surendra Mohanty

Tr.

Chandramoni Narayanaswami

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Translated by :

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Odisha Sahitya Akademi
Bhubaneswar

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Foreword

Surendra Mohanty, son of Lokanath Mohanty and Susheela Devi, was a legend in Orissa even during his lifetime. Freedom fighter, journalist, parliamentarian and litterateur, he had achieved distinction in more than one field. But his contribution to literature has almost eclipsed his achievements in other fields. He is at the forefront of modern Oriya fiction, an honor he shares with Gopinath Mohanty. He has more than a dozen novels to his credit in addition to eleven anthologies of short stories, four books on the history of Oriya literature, biographies of Fakir Mohan Senapati, and Madhusudan Das and his own autobiography. Of these special mention must be made about the anthology of stories "Sabuja Patra O Dhusara Golap" which won the Orissa Sahitya Academy award in 1964 and the Bharat Nayak award from the Sambalpur University; the historical novel "Neela Saila" which won the Sahitya Academy award in 1969 and has been translated into many Indian languages; "Kula Brudha", another novel, which received the Sarala award in 1980 and his autobiography "Patha O Pruthivi" for which he was honored with the Orissa Sahitya Academy award for the second time in 1989.

As part of the golden jubilee programs the Academy is bringing out fifty golden books which include some translations

of Oriya works into English and Hindi. It is only meet and proper that Surendra Mohanty who was the president of the Academy during 1981-87 and had successfully conducted its silver jubilee celebrations in 1982, should find place among the authors translated. The translation of a collection of his short stories was entrusted to Chandramoni Narayanaswamy who had earlier translated his novel "Achalayatana". The English version "The Colossus" was published in 2001. Chandramoni is a poet and fiction writer who has authored more than twenty-five original works in English which include novels, anthologies of poems, anthologies of short stories and several collections of captivating stories for children. Simultaneously she has translated a number of works of eminent Oriya writers including Surendra Mohanty. This collection is a faithful reproduction of a dozen stories of Surendra Mohanty and does full justice to his language and style of narration.

The collection is a real spectrum of themes. The traumatic experiences of people uprooted by the partition of the country including the women forced into the flesh trade, the frustrations of job-seeking youth, the conflict in the minds of the young torn between an ideology and the natural yearning for beauty and romance, the merciless torture inflicted upon aged parents by dearly loved children are all vividly brought out in these stories which would not leave the readers untouched. Some stories like "Father and Son" and "The Lonely Sky" are real tear-jerkers.

I hope this book will be widely read and appreciated by book-lovers in the country and abroad.

Bhubaneswar
28th Sept.' 09
Dussehra

Haraprasad Paricha Patnaik
Secretary

What this translation means to me

This is my second attempt at translation of Surendra Mohanty's works. At the instance of his wife Smt. Renuka Mohanty I took up translation of the novel *Achalayatana* a few years ago. *The Colossus,* the English translation, was published by the Writer's Workshop, Calcutta in 2001. This collection of short stories was takenup in 2008.

I have often felt that translation is the field of the scholar rather than the creative writer. For this reason I never attempted any translation for a long time. It was only at the ripe old age of sixty, after four decades of original creative writing mostly in English, that I strayed into the field of translation which was also purely accidental. When preparations were afoot for celebration of the birth centenary of Kuntala Kumari Sabat, the Orissa Lekhika Sansad of which I am a life member, wanted to get some of her poems translated into English as a special gesture to pay homage to her memory and this led to the publication of my first translated work "*To Shefali and Other Selected Poems of Kuntala Kumari Sabat*" in February, 2000.

Translation is essentially the art of playing second fiddle with good grace. The role of the translator is to introduce the author in literary circles outside his state and country, make his

works available to readers outside that domain and ensure that the quality of translation is such as to earn for him the admiration and appreciation of a large number of readers. Thus, for a creative writer, translation is an exercise in self-effacement.

In this collection there are twelve stories written in different years from 1940 onwards and centering around events dating back to the Maurya period before Christ and as recent as the last quarter of the twentieth century. But these are timeless stories which can touch a chord in the hearts of readers at any given time. The story of the persecuted father Bimbisara in "*Father and son*" (*Pita O Putra)* could be the story of the sufferings of any aged parent at the mercy of the son or daughter. A freedom fighter himself Surendra Mohanty is deeply affected by the horrors of partition and the plight of people uprooted from familiar surroundings. The pathetic yet valiant struggle in which they learn to accept the inevitable and survive putting the past behind, is vividly brought out in *Night in the Metropolis* (*Mahanagarira Ratri*), *The Fugitives* (*Bhagawanta*) and "*Still the Sky is Blue*" (*Akash Tathapi Sunil*). Hani Master, the tailor of the elite, forced to leave the small town where he had his roots and which was a haven of communal amity goes to Pakistan only to be disillusioned by the realties there and sneaks back to the same old town, crossing the border without visa and passport. When he is suspected to be a Pakistani spy and is hounded out he dupes every one and ekes out a living posing as a juggler with a monkey. But he is happy sleeping on his native soil and under the sky of his country which is still blue. Hani Master is an unforgettable character. So is Brajeswar, the ex-ruler of a tiny kingdom-cruel, vicious and haughty with the soul of a dinosaur in a body ravaged by drinking and

excessive indulgence in other vices and untamed by exile and loss of power and position. "*Australia*" is a story which is both comic and pathetic, vividly portraying the contrast between dream and reality, aspiration and achievement. In *Bread and the Moon* (*Roti O Chandra*) we get a glimpse of the yearning for the sweet, simple joys of life secretly nourished by young minds despite their commitment to an ideology in which such joys have no place. In *The Appointment Letter*, the author who was once forced to work as a travelling agent of Ludihiana Silk Company, has shown great sympathy in portraying the character of Sunand the jobless young poet who is offered appointment as a crane driver.

With uncanny skill Surendra Mohanty has created unforgettable characters using not only human beings but also objects like trees, rivers and hills. These are symbols of the strong affinity man has with nature when he is in a pensive, reminiscent mood. The *Krushnachooda tree* which draws Sadananda the journalist like a magnet; the silk-cotton tree which is a symbol of permanency and continuity for Hani Master, the mango orchard and the river Kalinai in *The Lonely Sky* (*Nisanga Akash*) are such "silent characters" which are as memorable as the human characters who have forged a strong bond with them.

I hope the readers and book-lovers find these stories interesting and the quality of translation is up to the mark.

Chandramoni Narayanaswamy

Bhubaneswar
24th June' 2009
SriGundicha

Contents

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Australia

My pocket is torn. The same uncurrent coin is lying in it in a corner.

In this prosperous earth with a population of two hundred billion, my only asset is an uncurrent four-anna coin.

But the owner of the tea shop is every inch a gentleman. Since morning he has given me three cups of tea on credit.

The cigarette vendor too knows my distress. He does not insist upon payment of the balance for the cigarettes purchased. On the main road of the city is a stream of people. Countless people moving in a continuous procession from early morning on the road, their minds full of hopes and dreams.

I am also floating along that stream of pedestrians. My dream is Australia, far away Australia where I am to explore a new gold mine.

I have other dreams too. I will float a big company with a capital of several lakhs of rupees in the gold belt of Australia. I have obtained the monopoly for exploration of gold.

Australia ! Far-away Australia where rings of black smoke emerge from the chimneys in the gold mines of Kulgandi; where

nomadic shepherds lose their way in the sandy plain dotted with eucalyptus trees in stormy nights.

On the road moves a continuous procession of naked, starving beggars – men and women both young and old, adults, adolescents and children; some blind, some with sight; some healthy; some sickly.

"Allah will bless you..."

"Babu, God will keep you happy..."

God's blessings and Allah's grace are bartered for a few paise. Oh Allah ! Your grace is the cheapest commodity in the world.

The leper, crippled and diseased, leaning against the lamp-post is the peddler of Allah's grace. He has kept Allah's grace in the bundle slung over his shoulder like wares for sale. On his head is a faded woollen cap.

On his face there are innumerable wrinkles, his eyes are white and watery. He wears a black coat; a torn dirty coat discarded by somebody.

"Allah will bless you, son"

Near him an old woman has also spread her wares on a torn sackcloth.

They are not trading in the same commodity; the old woman is trading long life extending up to a million years. Before I reached there some buyers had come and purchased long life extending to a million years. In a broken tin cup before her are coins adding up to a sum of three annas–the price of longevity of millions of years.

Is longevity of a million years the nomenclature of Allah's grace ?

A cup of tea is more appropriate!

I shall certainly pass on that uncurrent coin to the owner of some tea shop in the darkness of dusk. I moved into a narrow street.

The soft lovely morning sunlight, the clear beautiful autumn sky - like the playful benign eyes of a new bride.

On the lonely street covered with red pebbles are scattered the shadows of the houses on either side.

Perth Harbour of Australia ! The ship from Bombay anchored at Perth Harbour.

The vast limitless Indian ocean. On the white foam of blue waves are floating white sea-gulls, their hot wings moistened by drops of water sprayed by the raising waves.

Ha ! Ha ! Ha !

Perth Harbour. The smell of the sweating bodies of porters, the smell of tobacco, the smell of strange bodies, the smell of Australia–a strange mixture of many smells... Wonderful !

Amir Khan street. On a tin plate fixed on the wall was written in coal tar "Amir Khan Street". "The stamp of immortality in the twentieth century. In the subcontinent where an uncurrent two-paise coin could buy longevity of a million years, a tin plate and a lump of black coal are enough to ensure immortality.

"Have you not ever heard
Of Amir Khan with the beard ?
Life and youth
Fame and wealth.
Are all washed away.

By Time, the great cascade"

Ha ! Perth Harbour and Amir Khan Street !

There is a drain on either side of the street. Dirty water was flowing in the drain. Floating on it were a dead kitten, pieces of paper, bits of straw and many other things.

An ugly mockery of the Indian Ocean. The current of dirty water from the bath room carrying lather was a distorted version of the foam of the dancing waves of the ocean.

Rummaging through that drain was a child–black, ugly, sickly; a skeleton; the child of some Harijan of Mahatma Gandhi. Alas! God ! such is your artistic sense !

Ha ! Ha ! Ha !

The child started and looked at me. His eyes were timid and unclean; the bloodless yellowish eyes of a Harijan boy.

Even in the twentieth century a great deal is still left for the discovery of India. In the commercial sector of India some new trades have also come up along with industrial development.

Sale of longevity of a million years and Allah's grace was one such trade; Harijan boys rummaging in the drain was another. Somewhere in the mud inside the drain might be a safety–pin, a blunt knife and many such articles.

On certain days when God's kindness is abounding even a four-anna or eight-anna coin might be found.

These are the new undeciphered codes of India.

The uncurrent four-anna coin slipped down from my torn pocket when I had come farther into that lane. Let the uncurrent coin get lost in the moving earth. I felt a strange sense of joy.

The fake nickel produced a harsh sound on hitting the ground. Emerging from the drain the Harijan boy pounced upon it.

In his eyes was the joy of success.

He looked at me.

His eyes showed both hatred and distrust. He did not trust me, I might snatch it from him ! He put it in his mouth.

Thereafter, he fled from me like a kite; as if he had been spotted by some beast of prey.

At the far end of Amir Khan Street was the slum of the scavengers of the city.

The boy was standing before a dilapidated hut in the slum. The ground was covered with the white flowers of a drum-stick tree–a lovely sight. He was happily smoking a bidi.

On seeing me he vanished into the hut. My golden Australia was lost somewhere in the wilderness of broken tenements in the scavenger's slum. Alas Australia !

It was 2 O'clock at night. The moon appeared pale in the sky. Sleep evaded my eyes.

Australia–golden Australia–far away Australia... O Australia !

If ever in my autobiography a whole chapter is devoted to any mortal, then he will be Nasir the cigarette vendor who sells cigarettes to me carelessly on credit.

Puffing away at a cigarette I proceeded to Amir Khan Street. I do not know what distant attraction it had for me.

I reached the scavenger's slum. The Harijans were sleeping peacefully, carefree in the dusty lap of God.

The same drum-stick tree. It's twisted shadow was lying scattered in the moonlight.

On a piece of sackcloth under the drum-stick tree, was sleeping the Harijan boy I had seen in the morning. A strip of pale moonlight fell on his body.

Night–sweet night–beautiful, peaceful, benign night. Under the tender touch of night, he had fallen asleep since long ruminating on the events of that lucky day.

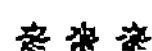
The same routine next morning-probing for rare treasures in the drain by the side of Amir Khan Street.

My eyes were not sleepy. Australia... golden Australia. I could not get sleep.

Under the drum-stick tree that boy had curled up on the bed of sand. In his hand that uncurrent four-anna coin was shining in the moonlight, on his lips was a faint, fearful smile.

I came back.

In the sky the moon too appeared bright like that uncurrent four-anna coin.



Night In the Metropolis

The disturbing roar of a steamer was heard in the Ganga jetty.

The lonely road in Chowrangee was hazy and shrouded in mystery like the abode of ghosts.

Chowrangee–the mecca of business culture.

On the other side of the tram track lay hundreds of refugees. Some were still smoking bidis. Dying embers were crackling in the coal ovens on the roadside.

The lonely moon of the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight was moving in the highway of the sky swaying from side to side like a drunkard.

In the nearby hotel, exclusively meant for foreigners the dancing spree had ended. Cars of sahibs clad in foreign attire were coming out of the hotel one after another, blowing horns. That was Chowrangee pavement.

"Salaam, sahib"

"Salaam"

"You want a girl ?"

"Nonsense ! what do you mean ?", I snapped.

But that was his business. He said hesitantly. "It is not very far, sahib, at the turning of Park Street."

I proceeded on my way. Shame and hatred sent shivers through my body. I would have shot him dead like a dog; the low, dirty creature! But he was only a representative of the middleman culture; a mere broker. If leaders could be honoured for acting as brokers between the state and the public, if lawyers could be respected for acting as brokers between justice and the people and those who officiate between man and God could be revered as saints, then why should this man be condemned for acting as a broker between some unfortunate woman's body and a debauch's lust ? Strange indeed are the middleman culture and business ethics. These people would sell the very soul of the country some day. They would get the broker's percentage. So what is the harm ?

Some one was lurking in the shadow of a pillar. At my sight he darted forward, came and stood before me.

I looked back. The man who had first accosted me was getting into a taxi along with a man dressed like a sahib... I moved on in an indifferent manner as if I had heard nothing. The man followed me for some distance and then returned. A coachman, driving his carriage on the road called out in a shrill voice "Please come, sir, let me take you to the big bazar."

Then, another, with the same suggestion. "Just above Park Street turning". I looked at him. He started describing Park Street turning in detail.

"What is this business ?," I asked him.

He replied calmly "Yes, babu, the income from percentage and tips is not bad."

That was followed by a tempting description of Park Street turning.

xx xx xx

Not Park Street turning; but after that.

Night in the month of March. A hot current of air was emerging from the ground below. The heart–rending sigh of the all–enduring earth as if her very breath was being stifled. The silk-cotton trees on the right side of the road were laden with countless flowers. In the high-rise apartments resembling pigeon-holes thousands of families were in deep slumber– parents, siblings, couples, everybody.

A lane, after that a by-lane, where the by-lane ends was a ground floor flat. From the flats in the upper storey was heard the loud laughter and the pandemonium of drunken talk. That was Park Street turning.

The man shook the handle of the door from outside and called. The door was opened. The woman who opened it was probably the prostitute of Park Street turning. I hung down my head in shame. I do not know what I was thinking staring at the ground. The man gave me a slight push, saying "Bakshish, babu. I took out a five–rupee note from my pocket and put it in his hand. He was satisfied and said "salaam" as of habit. Then he cast a look at the resident of Park Street turning and said "My due, sister."

"What more ?" I asked him.

"My percentage," he replied.

I dropped another five–rupee note in his hand and said "Now get lost".

He left whistling carelessly. The woman of Park Street turning stared at me in surprise for some time and then said "Please come in".

My throat was parched. I went in and enquired "Can you give me something to drink ?"

She said "Certainly" and called "Minu, Minu".

After a few minutes a girl of thirteen or fourteen came with drooping eyes; annoyance writ large on her face. But that only enhanced the beauty of her face which was as lovely as a blooming lotus. The woman said "Bring a glass of beer. Minu, with ice in it."

Anyway the lady had taste I felt relieved. Minu left. Her long plait loosened in sleep was repeatedly twining about her plump bottom like the eager arm of a lover. She had fixed a red rose in her plait but it had shrivelled.

I was staring at her, fascinated. The older woman said "She is my sister, babu. But she has not yet been initiated."

She probably suspected that I was yearning for Minu's body.

But had such flesh satiated the hunger of my body at any time? It was only meant for the yearning in the mind. She could be loved like my own daughter but not enjoyed like a whore...

Minu brought a tray with a glass of beer with ice and placed it before me.

"You haven't brought cigarette", said the lady.

As Minu was leaving to fetch cigarette ! "I have cigarettes. Sit down."

Minu sat down. But she could hardly keep awake. I wanted to put her head in my lap and tell her the fable of the prince who had the princess in his arms and was carrying her off on the winged horse with the cruel hungry giant, just returned to the cave, in hot pursuit.

Minu yawned and said in an imploring voice. "Let me go, sister. My head is aching."

As she got up her long hair cascaded down to her rounded bottom. She left behind a variety of contradictory emotions like compassion, sympathy, tenderness, hatred, affection and yearning.

After Minu had left. I looked at the woman. She was about forty. Her skin was no longer taut and there were crows' feet at the corners of her eyes. Still she had spared no effort to appear young and had applied powder, lipstick and rouge in ample measure, which, however, made her look ten years older. If she had a son he might be of my age.

But that night I was with her in that flat at Park Street turning. Two empty beer bottles were lying under the sofa. The ash-tray was filled with cigarette butts.

What a terrible form of woman. Yet beneath that loose skin there was once a girl, a bride, a mother who had been killed by reality. What now survives is a repulsive insatiable hunger in the shape of a woman whose greed is not appeased even after swallowing the soul of humanity. How terrible ! How repulsive ! Every hair in my body bristled with hatred.

In every face there would be something which reminds one of another. Similarly the two deep semi-circular lines in the face of that woman reaching down from her nostrils to her chin brought to my mind another lady.

I was then travelling by the Howrah-Delhi-Punjab Mail. The inter-class compartment was packed to capacity with passengers. I was standing throughout the journey from Howrah to Asansol. A Hindi-speaking woman, sitting at one end of a long berth, said "How long can you keep standing, son ? Sit here."

I sat by her side reluctantly Signalling to me to sit comfortably she said "Why this shyness, babu ? You are of my son's age after all. He is in Delhi and I am going to see him."

Her face too had two curved lines reaching down from the nostrils to the chin. But those lines were smooth and delicate, not sharp and harsh like those in the face this woman. If this woman had met me casually during a journey, she too might have called me son.

But the face which was before me at Park Street turning at 2 O'clock in the night was polished with powder and rouge.

The silence was unbearable. I wanted to run away and escape from the place.

"What is your name ?", I asked her.

"Chandra", she replied. Then added in a familiar tone "Why don't you come in ? How long can you sit here ?"

I took out two notes and dropped them in her hands, saying "It is quite late I am going".

Chandra was probably thinking that she had no moral right to keep that unexpected wealth. When she was about to say something, I opened the door and said "Give half of that to Minu."

When I was leaving I heard Chandra say "But her auspicious initiation is not yet over."

The sweet March night bathed in moonlight turned sour in a moment. One day Minu will be initiated into the trade auspiciously! Thereafter the libertines of the metropolis will enjoy her body one after another. Once her body was sucked dry and drained of all vitality, she would be dumped in some drain like the remnant bone in meat.

xx xx xx

Twelve O'clock at night next day. The same Chowrangee pavement and the same query "You want a girl, sir ?

I was on my way to that flat above Park Street turning.

I reached the flat. It was bolted from inside. I shook the handle and the door opened. Minati said. "Please come in". I entered and sat on the same sofa I had occupied the previous day. Minati's blooming face was brighter and lovelier than it was then.

Minati said "Two men are inside. Sister will come presently. I shall get some beer."

"No Minu, give me only water", I said.

Minati brought a glass of water and was about to leave after placing it on a teapoy. But I said "Sit down, Minu."

Minu sat on the edge of my sofa, hesitant and confused.

"Where is your house ?" I asked her.

Tears welled up in her eyes and started flowing down her round cheeks. "You are crying !" I exclaimed.

"My house is quite far off, babu" she said. "We had come as refugees. I have lost track of my parents. My brother was stabbed to death. Finally, my mother brought me here..." she could not proceed further. The unfortunate mother had sold her at Park Street turning and left, getting rid of the burden of her life.

These days there is so much to weep over in this world that weeping has become a matter of course. No tears are left to shed; so I could not weep with Minu.

"Did you get any education, Minu" ? I asked her.

"Yes. I can read."

I took out a book of fables from my pocket and put it in her hand, saying "Keep this, Minu. Read a book whenever you feel depressed."

With girlish playfulness Minu passed her hand over the attractive cover of the book. On it was the picture of the prince of some nameless country. He was galloping on a winged horse to rescue the captive princess.

Was Minu wondering whether the prince of her dream would ever come ? No; he would not. The wings of the flying horse had been torn to shreds and scattered in the impenetrable forest of the metropolitan suburb.

The reckless foot-falls of Chandra and her two lovers were heard from the stairs. Minu got up and left.

Those men also left. Chandra shut the door and sat down by my side. Her body exuded the pungent smell of cheap gin. I moved away in disgust.

"Not here today, babu. Come upstairs" Chandra said.

I did not want to. But unable to suppress my irrepressible. curiosity I followed her upstairs. In the upper storey was Chandra's playhouse filled with bottles of whisky and soda and cigarette packets.

Chandra was sitting on a sofa. Her head was swaying due to the intoxication of gin and whisky.

My eye was caught by a framed photograph on her dressing table. It was the photo of a placid-looking young man. I went near the table and scanned it.

Chandra said in a voice choked with tears. "Do you know who he is, babu ? He is my own son whom I carried in my womb for ten months. He is not a bastard but the son of his father. Oh ! the day they hacked him to death before my eyes ! Just as they killed my husband. I had seen man becoming beast on that day. They let me live because they wanted my body. I somehow escaped and came to this place with the polluted body which they had enjoyed and cast away."

Chandra started weeping like an innocent girl with her head on my chest. Because of the foul smell of gin I wanted to push her away. But I could not... Let her weep as much as she liked if weeping brought some peace to her bruised soul.

After some time she lifted her head from any breast and dried her eyes. Tears had washed away the make-up from her face, revealing the skin dirty and horrible to view. Her face

appeared like a can without handle. Two drops of tears gleamed in her eyes like dying embers.

I took out some notes from my pocket and pressed them into her hands saying "I am leaving, Chandra."

She said "No; babu. I cannot let you go today. Those two drunkards..."

It was five minutes to two "No; I must go."

Chandra pressed her painted lips on my face and said "No; you cannot go, babu."

I was feeling as if a piece of burning coal had stuck to my body. I gave her a hard slap on the cheek and said "Let me go".

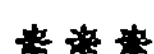
"Babu", cried Chandra, hurt and taken aback.

I said "Not babu, call me son if you like. If your son had been alive..."

She threw herself on my breast and burst out crying "Oh! God !"

Outside, the night of the metropolis was also crying out in parody "Oh ! God !

That anguished cry was echoing in the disturbed roar of the steamer leaving the river bank at Ganga jetty.



Bread and the Moon

The strike by the workers of the cloth mill of the capitalist had continued for a month.

Braving all the conspiracies of the rival union, the diabolical attemps of the mill owner to counter it and above all the pressure from the government machinery, the strike was gathering strength and momentum day by day for which the efficiency and leadership displayed by the local unit of the communist party must be given credit.

Comrade Binod was feeling completely exhausted after being on the move all day going round the labour colony encouraging and instigating the workers, collecting donations, taking them around the town in a procession shouting the slogan "Red flag zindabad". He returned to the party office and lay down on a stack of pamphlets and newspapers kept in a small room. He fell asleep immediately.

Comrade Lalita entered the room after some time. She was slim and graceful; a good writer and a woman of few words. Translation of the English booklets and circulars of the party was her responsibility. She was also the editor of a weekly published by the party. Now because of the strike she had been assigned one more task-writing the bulletin.

That room was comrade Lalita's office. She switched on the light. There was a small table near the window opening to the west. Books and newspapers were piled up on the table. On the wall were three framed photographs–Marx flanked by Lenin and Stalin.

Hidden under the papers on the table was an old ink-stained calling bell. Lalita pressed it thrice with her delicate fingers.

Ramu, the office boy, came. He too was a comrade, the son of a labourer.

Lalita said, "coffee" and Ramu left.

The lovely moon had risen on the sky. The party office was at the far end of the factory area.

A zig-zag road covered with small red pebbles passed by the window. Occasionally a bullock cart or a few pedestrians could be seen on the road. On the other side of the road extending right up to the horizon was an expansive stony plain.

Somewhere a flower was exuding fragrance which thrilled the sweet peaceful moments of the night.

Feeling tired and vexed Lalita switched off the light.

A bar of moonlight fell on her lap. Her heart softened with an indescribable sense of fulfillment and contentment. It occurred to Lalita that many battles in life had become meaningless, merged and lost in controversies but there is no end to this nectar-sweet evening bathed in moonlight or the thrill and excitement in it.

Lalita again switched on the light. This was escapism, the play of counter revolutionary *burshuaism* (capitalasim).

Comrade Binod's snoring had become deeper and louder.

Lalita had not seen the sleeping Binod till then. She started on hearing the snoring. She looked at him.He was wearing rather soiled trousers, a half shirt and a pair of worn out Kabuli sandals. On his shirt was pinned the party badge with the "sickle and hammer" emblem on it.

Ramu brought coffee. Lalita ordered one more cup and he left.

Lalita respected Binod for his leadership and knowledge of Marxism. Binod could quote Marx at will. Once he had been in love with a girl who reciprocated his love. She had crossed the marriageable age. But her father was every inch a *burshua*. When he came to know that his daughter had chosen her life partner, he summoned both of them and told them that a son-in-law who flaunted the badge of sickle and hammer was not acceptable to him under any circumstances.

Binod came back disappcinted But his disappointment was not on account of frustrated love. A girl like Leela joining the party would have contributed greatly to the progress of communism ! Still he was meticulously sending the bulletin to her. When some of his friends ridiculed this vain pursuits of his love, he had said "Marx says–Nothing is being; everything is becoming" In other words nothing is without a purpose. Love too has a purpose. If the course of love is interpreted as love in vain in dialectics there is no need to grieve over it.

Ramu brought another cup of coffee. Lalita got up and with girlish playfulness, pressed her thumb on. Binod's cheek. Binod opened his eyes and sat up on the stack of newspapers.

"What about a cup of coffee, comrade ?", asked Lalita.

Binod's face lit up with the joy of getting something unexpected. "Thank you, comrade", he said

Thereafter both came and sat by the table. They drank coffee silently.

The moon shone brightly outside and the ground on the other side of the road stretched out for immeasurable distance.

From somewhere in the stony plain came the crescendo of the intoxicating notes of *raag* Nageswari played on the flute.

"Has the bulletin for tomorrow gone to the press, comrade Lalita?" Binod asked.

But Lalita was recalling a poem. "Oh moon ! the distance between you and me measuring thousands of miles has been wiped out today. You have come to my window today in the form of a new actor, in the garb of a lover. O my beautiful one ! my loved one ! take me in your arms in a tight embrace."

Binod continued. "A big meeting is scheduled to be held tomorrow in the evening. Workers of all other mills in the mill area will join our strike from tomorrow. So your bulletin should be as hard hitting as a bullet. If you can compose a song to be sung in chorus before the meeting starts, that would be very nice."

"What sort of a song ? Tell me", asked Lalita.

Binod said "Well, somewhat like this

On barren land

We had raised

Rich harvests–golden harvests."

Lalita burst out laughing "You are laughing !" exclaimed Binod.

"No", Lalita replied briefly Binod lighted a cigarate.

Lalita directed a weary look at the photo of Marx. "Alas ! Marx your economical interpretation of history has reduced man

to a pig for whom life is nothing but a matter of bread, who lives only to eat well ! you have made bread more desirable than this moon in the eye of man. You have made abundance the aim of life. But you have given no indication of the higher object that is beyond this plenty."

Binod threw the burnt out cigarette out of the window and said "I have been noticing for some time, comrade. You have somehow become an escapist. Fraud has termed this escapism as the "death instinct". A vacuum causes depletion of vitality in the body and brings about mental weakness, a *burshua* complex, a spiritual numbness–terror of freedom in the words of Errick Frome."

Lalita was getting irritated. She could not tolerate these book-worms; men who had become machines without the freedom to call their soul their own. What Marx had said, views of Freud, or Frome–these were the ultimate in life for them. Anything beyond that was irrelevant, weakness, *burshuaism*.

Lalita said "I have heard all that many times before, comrade. Why not go for a walk ? A lovely moon has risen."

At another time Binod would have rejected this suggestion of Lalita as counter–revolutionary *burshua* complex and explained to her Lenin's insurrection tactics or the secrets of conspiratory revolution. But that day after all the exertion and exhaustion he too longed for the moonlight, the coolness and the peace of the night.

"Let us go", he said.

Binod and Lalita had come a long way walking beyond the city.

All that was visible was the expanse of the stony plain and the play of the wanton moonlight.

Both of them sat down on a slope. Now and then Binod would quote from the letters Marx had written to Angels.

"Has not Marx said anything about the moonlit night ?" Lalita asked lightly.

While Binod was considering the reply to that question, he heard the rising notes of a flute emerging from the ocean of moonlight far, far away. That music had mingled and merged with that vast uneven plain, the placid moist night and the wayward moonlight.

Lalita and Binod listened to the music as if they were in a trance.

After some time two shadows came and sat down at a little distance from them. The music continued to pour from the flute as if the untamed river of life was rushing to merge with the sea of moonlight breaking its banks.

There was an irresperssible curiosity in the minds of both Binod and Lalita to see those two

They got up and as they went nearer, the music stopped. Now they recognized them. They were Naina and Kajri, hailing from Chotanagpur and workers of the same mill where the strike was on.

They were not getting their wages because of the strike. They would probably go without food that night. Still they were bursting with the abundance of life.

"You play the flute exceedingly well, Naina", said Lalita.

"Yes, sister. In our village we roam about the forest and mountain when the moon rises", Naina replied in Chatisgarh dialect.

The night had advanced. Binod and and Lalita returned to the party office.

Lalita was musing–this is where Marxism falls short; life is not meant only for production and distribution. Full wages and a full belly might be the utility of life but not its object. Had it been so, why this enchantment of moonlight, this pleasing perfection of nature ? Life is more beautiful than survival.

But Marxism had forgotten the beauty of life in the tumult and the battle for survival.

"They are so happy", said Lalita.

Binod started and looked at her. He felt as if some one had knocked at the closed door of his heart softly but firmly. Naina's flute was heard again. The smell of henna in the coeiffeur of Kajri could still be felt.

Binod lifted his eyes from the ground and glanced at Lalita. Her body bathed in moonlight exuded a rare sweetness from every limb. The next moment he recalled that all this was only dry *burshua* sentiment.

Lalita and Binod were returning by the same uneven path. The party office came within sight.

Lalita had to write the bulletin. Both her mind and body were replete with vexation and fatigue.

The sound of Naina's flute was heard faintly in the silence and loneliness of the night.

To Lalita it seemed that it was the strong challenge of pure eternal life to the incompleteness of Marxism and the impurity of the struggle for survival.

❋ ❋ ❋

Krishnachooda

In the office of the weekly "Sangram", Sadanand was correcting proof. It was an old building. The rain was pouring in torrents; water trickling on the floor. One side of the wall was covered with green moss.

The non-stop rain of July had somewhat abated. Weary and worn out Sadanand pushed the proof to one corner of the table. Reading and correcting proof for so many years, he had somehow become a pessimistic cynic. From beginning to end life was nothing but mistakes, more mistakes, only mistakes.

Four more pages or sixteen columns were still to be written Sadanand lit a cigarette, weary, tired and exhausted.

Sadanand was editor, proof reader all rolled into one. He had a colleague but he could not understand anything.

For some reason unknown to himself Sadanand turned back and looked out of the open window which he had not done even by accident or mistake for many days; how many he did not know.

Adjacent to the window was a Krishnachooda in bloom. The green canopy of the tree was hidden under the lovely red blossoms.

Beautiful : No; to describe it as merely beautiful was an understatement. That crimson expanse of krishnachooda was lovely, delicate, radiant and sweet.

The black clouds of July reaching down to touch the earth and the krishnachooda nestling in the lap of the clouds was like a bundle of yellow grass in the hand of a sanyasi crowned with a bunch of new blown krushnachooda blossoms.

Sadanand threw the cigarette butt out of the window. Sixteen columns still left.

He shut the window violently. The life of a slave in this world is not life but survival without purpose. The earth is full of slaves. Bondage has sucked the joy of living from the very marrow of their bones.

What was the difference between the labourers in the slum downtown and Sadanand ? The labourer was the slave of the factory owner and the idealist Sadanand of an ideal or of idealism.

But the labourer enjoys life. At least once a week, when he is paid the weekly wages he drinks adulterated liquour and tastes the contentment of life. But he did not have even that | For him life was a great discontentment from first to last. There is no fulfillment in idealism.

The window opened automatically under the impact of the wind.

The colour of the krishnachooda so full of life was a mockery of a slave's life pining for death.

Many, many years had passed since that day when he had playfully adorned the hair of Tamasa with a bunch of

krishnachooda. That was the day when she had come in her bridal attire-a day like the languid noon on a rainy day in late July.

Now the playfulness in his hand was dead.

Sixteen columns still left.

Sadanand came and sat at his table again. But how was he to fill up those sixteen columns ?

With the intermediary tactics of England ? Or the rise of feudalism in Russia ? The money lending of America ? The intellectual poverty of India ? Sadanand was in no mood to write about all that.

Well, why not write about krishnachooda ? This radiant, graceful, colourful krishnachooda whose blood-red brilliance has made even the silent, wet noon of July appear wayward.

No, from the point of view of an editor the krishnachooda was an irrelevant creation. The world would ridicule the description of krishnachooda in the columns of a paper.

But was it not possible to have a different model of politics in which the object of life was not mere survival; whose purpose not empire, dominance, power and progress through exploitation of others; in which the krishnachooda too has a place in life ?

Sadanand resumed his seat to tackle the proof. But that day his mind was revolting against that narrow corner. The krishnachooda was flying the saffron banner of that revolt outside.

Sadanand got up from his chair like one enchanted. Then he left the office and rushed out.

The rain had stopped. He came and stood under the krishnachooda tree. The wind had scattered the red petals of krishnachooda all over the green grass under the tree.

Sadanand felt the resurgence of early youth, dead since long, in every vein of his body. He wanted to climb the tree and pluck the flowers to his heart's content.

But he lacked the courage to do it. Climbing a tree to pluck flowers at his age! He would be the butt of the world. Sadanand looked around. There were people everywhere. Countless people–mean, contemptible two-legged animals.

He saw Ramesh coming. He was surely coming to complain about some difficulty.

Ramesh said "The press has been closed. You are wandering here. But tell me how the compositors are to be paid their wages tomorrow."

"I don't know", said Sadanand.

"That means ?" asked Ramesh.

"I don't know. Go away, Ramesh. Don't worry me."

Ramesh left crestfallen. After some time Sadanand too left. People everywhere, he did not dare to climb the tree to pluck flowers.

It was quite late in the night. In the cloudy sky of the dark fortnight was the dim, delayed rise of the moon.

A bar of that dull moonlight had fallen on the sleeping Tamasa.

Sleep had deserted the eyes of Sadanand which had the red waywardness of krishnachooda.

Was this the same Tamasa in whose hair he had once pinned a bunch of krishnachooda ? No, this Tamasa was not the new bride in whose hair was gathered all the enchantment of the dark night. That Tamasa was dead.

Man is dead on the day he is left without a purpose. What remains of his life thereafter is the monotonous existence of a slave.

Tamasa was dead, so was Sadanand.

Sadanand left his bed and set out to look for that krishnachooda.

It seemed as if the krishnachooda was fanning the sleeping earth with its swaying canopy.

Sadanand came and stood under the tree. He tightened his *dhoti* around him to climb the tree. But he felt as if he had become a completely passive cripple. The lively playfulness of his limbs had oozed out since long.

Still he started climbing, mustering all his strength and skill.

Suddenly he heard a voice "Who is that ?"

It was the constable on beat wearing a long rain-coat, wielding a baton and smoking a *bidi*.

Sadanand slid down the tree and the constable flashed his torch on him.

"It is you ! At this time !"

"No; nothing particular; just like that", Sadanand mumbled in confusion and quickly left the place before the constable could say anything further.

He felt that this earth was dead. Sadanand was dead. The krishnachooda was the only tear-drenched monument of picturesque life.



The Soul of the Dinosaur

The train was probably passing through Roopa bridge.

Maharaj Rai Brajeswar Rai raised the glass of the shutter and looked out. Dim light was spreading over the eastern sky. Dawn was advancing like a woman drenched in tears.

His head felt heavy due to the excess of whisky he had taken in the previous night.

Yes, it was Roopa bridge. Under the bridge the zig zag current of Roopa was quiet and still like a woman exhausted after making love at the end of the night. Was it Madhavi ? Mohini ? Shrimati ? Anuradha ?

Brajeswar relit the pipe. There has been no change during the last ten years. The river Roopa, the familiar landscape on its banks, the next station Rajkanchangarh– nothing had changed.

As if a decade was of no consequence. Brajeswar took off his woollen sleeping gown and threw it on the berth.

Return to Kanchangarh on that cool morning afger ten long years in exile made Brajeswar's brain, heavy with whisky, light and alert. The train slowed down on entering

the yard of Rajkanchangarh station. From the platform was heard a shrill chorus–hailing some one. "Maharaj Rai Brajeswar Rai *ki jai*" which brought a smile to his face which was as hard as steel.

The train came to a halt. Brajeswar looked at the platform outside through the window. He was returning to Kanchangarh after a long absence of ten years. So the platform was full of people. Many changes had taken place during the period. Kanchangarh was no longer a state, royalty had ended; Brajeswar's strongly-built body bore the marks of middle age.... He opened the door of the compartment. Three servants entered slowly and cautiously. One helped him put on the dress, another held out water and towel for washing the face and the third one brought his morning tea. Outside the compartment was the commotion of people shouting wishes for his victory. The departure of the train was already late by three minutes. Still Brajeswar did not come out of the coupe. His luggage was being unloaded from another compartment–four rifles, several boxes, camera and many such articles. Brajeswar slowly got down from the coupe and stood on the platform. The shouts of the mob hailing him rent the sky. The marigold garlands which they put on his neck almost hid his face.

Letting out smoke through the pipe, Brajeswar asked somebody standing nearby. "How are you, Mahapatra ? Are they all people of Kanchangarh ?"

Mahapatra or Nilambar Mahapatra said "Coming to know of the arrival of your Highness, they are waiting here since early morning with auspicious water pots and decorating the road with streamers."

The memory of the events of one night ten years ago, surfaced in Brajeswar's mind. In the darkness of the night in September 1942, the Political Agent Michael Sahib, nodding under the intoxication of whisky, had said, "As ordered by the paramount British Government, you have to leave Kanchangarh this minute. You are exiled for five years."

Outside Kanchangarh palace was an angry mob armed with country rifles and dynamite thirsting for the blood of the autocratic, philandering Brajeswar. This same Mohapatra had deftly and secretly brought him out of the palace and left him at the station. Nilambar Mahapatra, his companion in all his cruel, heartless adventures. He too had been jailed for three years accused of mamy evil deeds.

Mahapatra was shouting "Move aside and make way, you bastards."

A red Rolls Roys had been pushed and brought with much difficulty to the entrance of the station Brajeswar got into it and Nilambar taking the driver's seat, started it.

Though Brajeswar's face had changed much, yet there was no change in his weak uncontrolled body, the untrimmed hair on his pale cheeks and the roving look in his razor-sharp eyes burning with desire.

"Drive fast, Mahapatra", he said "I have to reach the palace at 1.15 pm."

The distance between the station and the fort was seventy miles but the car was moving at a speed of ten miles per hour.

Mahapatra accelerated the car and said "See how people are crowding around, sir."

An accident might have occurred. A man had come to place a garland on the bonnet of the car.

"Fools !" said Brajeswar. "Drive faster, Mahapatra. Tell them it is a punishable offence to block the public road."

"But these bastards have come from far away places to pay their respects to your Highness", Mahapatra argued.

Letting out smoke through his pipe, Brajeswar said "One day they had come in masses from far away places to take my blood. I value neither their respect nor their hostility. I cannot put on an act with folded hands. You drive the car fast."

Blowing the horn and raising a cloud of dust behind, the car turned a corner and became invisible.

(2)

Brajeswar was walking in the garden of Kanchangarh palace with a rifle in his hand.

Flocks of different birds were flying in the blue sky Cranes were flying in a row resembling a garland of jasmines Brajeswar took aim and fired and some birds fell down, wounded or dead. Brajeswar's harsh face lit up with joy. A *mali* came running to search for the fallen birds.

Another flock of chirping birds came within sight.

They were migratory birds from the great Caspian lake. They come seeking the warmth of the tropics at the onset of winter with the call of the distance in their wings and the song of life in their throats. Brajeswar took aim once again and fired bringing down some more cranes, their pictured wings spotted with drops of blood.

Brajeswar picked up a crane. It was dying a show death and he flung it down.

This fruitless waste of energy no longer amused him. He slowly returned to his palace with the rifle on his shoulder.

In the clear water of the pond in the garden shone the reflection of the white marble palace. The chirping of some bird emanating from the branches of the tall motionless Cyprus tree, startled him.

The silent lonely palace. The lonely fruitless life of a debauche. All around there was nothing but lifeless abundance. Brajeswar proceeded to the palace with bowed head.

Some people waiting in the portico for his sight, stood up. Many of his former subjects were coming to see him on his return to Kanchangarh after many years. Rulers and royalty were things of the past. Yet love and loyalty for this self-willed, licentious individual had not been wiped out from the minds of innumerable subjects. On seeing him they bowed to the ground. Brajeswar did not even look at them Handing the rifle to a servant he went in.

On entering the palace, he called Mahapatra and said "Why are they crowding here ? Throw them out."

"Times are changing, your honour", said Mahapatra. "It would be desirable to keep them in hand. When the rascals have come, is it proper to drive them out ?"

"It is natural that times should change." Brajeswar said in an angry tone." But I have not changed and don't want to change."

Mahapatra went away.

The cruel mockery of marble everywhere. Cold lifeless prosperity all around. The colourful rose garden was visible through the open window. Life was like the lifeless statue of a beautiful woman carved out of marble. It could be felt but could not be enjoyed. One could drink its beauty but the craving would not be satisfied. Everything was bright and clear. There was no dust, no dirt, no futility. But there was intense desire and immeasurable brutal strength to satiate it.

"Who is there ?", Brajeswar called out.

A bearer appeared and waited for orders.

"Whisky and soda," said Brajeswar.

Soda and whisky were brought. Brajeswar took one sip and put the glass down.

"Damodar Raiguru has come," Mahapatra came and reported.

"Which Damodar Raiguru ?"

"The same Damodar Raiguru. He was one of those who had surrounded the palace during the people's agigation. I shall send him away saying that you would not see him", said Mahapatra.

"No, send him straight to me," said Brajeswar.

Damodar Riguru entered after some time. He was a middle-aged man. Many spells of imprisonment and the torture he had suffered during the agitation had left their marks on his body which were still clearly visible. He bent his knees and head and bowed.

"What is the new demand you have brought, Raiguru ?", asked Brajeswar. "I had fulfilled all your demands long ago."

"What further demand ? Now you should move from the palace to the wilderness", Raiguru said with a smile.

"That is quite natural. For it has to be either the palace or the wilderness. God has willed nothing else for man", said Brajeswar.

"That means....?", queried Raiguru.

"The meaning is quite obvious Raiguru", Brajeswar said lighting his pipe." Persecution is man's religion Men created the state seeking protection from the persecution of one individual taking advantage of the weakness or heedlessness of another on getting the opportunity. But whoever had suspected that the state, stronger than the individual, would be a greater persecutor ?"

"Then why did we put an end to monarchy ?" asked Raiguru.

"There was a glaring defect in monarchy, Raiguru", said Brajeswar exhaling smoke through the pipe. I was persecuting and torturing my subjects without consulting them. But more painful torture and persecution are inflicted in democracy pretending to be in consultation with the people. For example when there was monarchy I could break your head without consulting you. But in the democratic system your head can be broken only with your consent." So saying Brajeswar burst into mocking laughter,

Raiguru said." Gradually I have also started believing in persecution for man has faith only in fear. Man's religion, society, civilization, culture, knowledge and wisdom are all founded on fear ! His social existence is safe so long as there is fear of persecution. Would man continue to be a prisoner of the fetters of society if there was no fear of persecution ?"

Brajeswar left the room. He had no time for such meaningless discussion !

(3)

It was evening.

Through the drawing room window Brajeswar was watching the garden bathed in moonlight. The rising moon of the eighth day of the bright fortnight, screened by the eucalyptus and casurina trees in the distance was like a princess in some folk tale dreaming about her prince charming. The whisky glass in his hand was empty. He came and sat on a sofa. The stuffed heads of some tigers he had shot dead years ago were dangling on the wall lolling out their awful repulsive tongues as if the all-consuming hunger of eternity was reaching out to swallow everything. Even after death their hunger had not subsided. All around there was a ghostly silence. Electric bulbs shed light inside.

Brajeswear pressed the button of an electric calling bell. Nilambar Mahapatra came after some time. Brajeswar said, "The evening is beautiful."

"Yes", said Mahapatra.

Exhaling smoke through the pipe, Brajeswar said. "But, Mahapatra, beauty cannot be enjoyed without company. Have you made any arrangement for that ? I mean any untouched, untested damsel...."

"The days when we could abduct at will whomsoever we liked are over. Now there are many difficulties", Mahapatra said as if he were guilty of something.

"What is the difficulty ?", said Brajeswar. "In those days I had the power to punish and take what I wanted by terrorizing the people. Now I have at least money to purchase what I want. I never thought that there is anything which money cannot acquire."

"But is it always possible to get all this for money ?" said Mahapatra, "Besides...."

Brajeswar poured out some whisky into the glass and sipped it silently. Then staring at the near empty glass for a few seconds as if observing something it, he said. "I have heard, Mahapatra, that there is a rare gem in your own house. So perhaps you do not have to search for what I want elsewhere."

Nilambar's eyes blazed like burning embers. His face grew stern. He said in a choked voice. "I have eaten the king's bread. But not my discretion. I was not aware that any one could put forward such a mean proposal to a father about his daughter."

Nilambar was about to go. But Brajeswar called him back. "Listen, Mahapatra."

Nilambr stopped like one hypnotized, arrested by this order. Brajeswar silently paced the room for some time and then said. "There is no one who had taken the oath of allegiance in feudalism and could also maintain his own discretion. You know that only too well, Mahaptra. Have you kept count of the innumerable occasions when at my instance you had sent similar requests or orders to fathers about their daughters ?"

"Pardon me," said Nilambar.

Brajeswar threw a key towards Nilambar and pointed to a safe, saying, "Open that safe."

Nilambar obeyed like a robot and opened the safe. It was packed with costly ornaments. Nilambar's greedy eyes lit up at the sight.

Brajeswar said, "The queen mother had kept these ornaments for the future bride of this royal family. But you know Mahapatra, that I prefer snatching things to getting them easily; because that which comes to the hand without an effort is the gift of somebody's charity. So you may rest assured that no princess has ever worn these ornaments. Your daughter can take them all if she wants."

Nilambar stared at Brajeswar fascinated. Brajeswar said, "But I shall adorn her with my own hands as suits my taste."

Nilambar sat down on a couch.

"Come quickly, I would be waiting", said Brajeswar.

(4)

It was late in the night. The moon of the eighth day of the bright fortnight was about to set. A soft darkness was slowly enveloping the garden outside the palace.

Emptying the last few pegs in a whisky bottle into a glass, Brajeswar said "Sundari ! Excellent. A simple sweet name which suits you."

Sundari–Nilambar's daughter.

What Brajeswar had heard was correct. Sundari was incomparable.

She was standing there with downcast eyes without uttering a word, resembling a frightened doe tethered by a

hunters's rope. She did not dare to look up at Brajeswar's drunken face.

Brajeswar said. "Come nearer, Sundari. Why are you standing there ?"

With timid steps Sundari slowly went and stood near him.

Brajeswar caressed her cheeks and then cupped her chin in one hand. Below her red lip was a black mole.

Brajeswar said, "Lovely. This mole on your chin is as beautiful as the bride waiting behind the veil."

He then disrobed her with both hands.

Sundari was nude and bashful like the moonlit night. Even her breasts were bare. Her thighs seemed to have been carved out of marble with great care by a skilled sculptor.

"Excellent symmetry", commented Brajeswar.

Sundari covered her face with her hands in shame.

Brajeswar took off all her ornaments with his own hands.

Unwittingly her hand had touched the black mark under her lip in her attempts to protect herself. Now there was a black line on her chin. She had put a black spot on her chin with *kajal* to appear more attractive.

Brajeswar said, "Your mole has been wiped out. Was it necessary to paint the rose red with a brush ?"

Weighed down by shame, fear and humiliation. Sundari hung down her head and collapsed on a sofa like the worn-out model of a sculptor.

Brajeswar crossed his arms over his chest and paced the room.

Then he approached her and said, "Tell me, Sundari, which is more beautiful–man's eye burning with lust or woman's bare body ?"

Sundari stared at him stupidly.

Brajeswar then opened the safe and said, "All this is yours, Sundari. Take whatever you want; as much as you like. That is your price. I am leaving. Now you can bolt the door from inside."

Brajeswar left the room. Nude Sundari stared after him like a mute. The sound of his foot steps was being lost in the silence of the night.



Father and Son

The dark dungeon in a narrow lane in the hilly kingdom was a little bright in the morning sunlight. From the main road of Rajagriha was heard the usual bustle and commotion of people.

The prisoner took one look at the light in the zigzag path with hungry eyes. The placid, misty light of the morning was like the blessing of Lord Budha.

The emaciated body of the prisoner ravaged by old age, starvation and persecution was like the shadow of a ghost. The once broad chest was covered with grey unkempt hair. The skin hung loose on the body.

The prisoner was Bimbisar, king of Magadh.

On the order of his son Ajatashatru, he had been confined to that tomb for the living.

Ajatashatru was determined to kill him slowly by starvation.

The lids of Bimbisar's sunken eyes closed due to exhaustion and weariness. Every limb of his body had become weak and numb due to hunger and starvation. Bimbisar licked his dry lips with his parched tongue and let out pathetic wails in a choked voice.

Rajagriha had been built on his orders. Now he was suffering the pangs of death hidden from all eyes in the dark underground chamber in that very city. The reward for the deeds of the previous birth.

His old capital Kushagranagar was once under threat of destruction by fire. It was feared that the entire city would be reduced to ashes. Bimbisar ordered that the owner of the house which first caught fire should be exiled. But such is the irony of fate that it was his palace which first caught fire. So Bimbisar went into voluntary exile in the cool forest.

The shady mountain wet with the waters of river. Sarpini and the cool forest bounded by Baibharagiri and Gridhrakoot fascinated Bimbisar. So Rajagriha the new capital of Magadh was built there on his orders.

Bimbisar opened his weary eyes as if to take a last look at Rajagriha. His lifeless, sightless eyes were like stone eyes.

The day Ajatashatru had imprisoned Bimbisar grief-stricken, tear-drenched Koshala Devi had implored him.

"Ajatashatru ! son !"

"Command me, princess of Kashi", Ajatashtru had said in a mocking tone.

"Are you ashamed to call me mother, son ?"

"Son ! ha ! ha ! ha !", Ajatashatru burst out. Then he said in a harsh unaffected voice. "I have no objection to address you as mother. But tell me, mother, what should be the response to a woman who had shaken up her abdomen, apprehending that the child in her womb would be his father's killer in the future and later appears before that unfortunate man calling him son ?"

"I have told you a hundred times that this is a false rumour", Koshala Devi said helplessly.

"There can be no rumour without a grain of truth in it, princess of Kashi", said Ajatashatru. "But why discuss all that now ? I am ready to consider all your requests except the release of Bimbisar."

Drying her tears with a corner of her soiled sari, Koshala Devi said "If the king wants to anoint himself with the blood of his father, then who can oppose it ? But I have only one prayer. O king ! Bimbisar could relish only the food cooked by this unfortunate woman. Please do not deprive me of the opportunity to cook his food and send it to the prison."

"I grant this prayer, princess of Kashi," said Ajatashatru.

But after her exit Ajatashatru issued orders to Chanda the guard of the prison that Bimbisar should not be allowed to touch anything sent by Koshala Devi.

The water pot was empty. As Bimbisar carried the empty pot to his lips with shaky hands it fell to the ground and broke to pieces. The sun was high in the sky. The faint bar of light on the zigzag mountain path had vanished long ago. In the prison there was nothing but nauseating stench and darkness–dense, unpleasant, cruel darkness.

The pangs of hunger had subsided. Only the yearning and thirst of the unsatiated body remained. Soon he would be liberated from that also. Thereafter nothing but vacuum like the world of Buddha's meditation. His eyelids were still and unblinking. The limits of the void were closing in around Bimbisar In the background of the great vacuum the placid image of Lord Budha in grave meditation came floating before

the misty eyes of Bimbisar. In His half closed-eyes was the blessing of peace.

Bimbisar's parched tongue and lips had cracked and dark blood was dripping from them. His dry throat was a little moistened with the blood. He roared liked a wounded animal.

The Saptaparni cave in the peak of the meditating Gridhrakoot rose up before the eyes of Binbisar in the background of the great vacuum. Bimbisar had been amazed when he heard that prince Gautam, scion of the Sakya dynasty had taken *sanyas* and was observing a four-month long penance in the Saptaparni cave.

Bimbisar went to the Giridhrakoot mountain accompanied by his ministers to see Gautam. The dust raised by herds of cattle returning from the grazing field covered the clear blue sky. On the southern edge of Saptaparni Gautam was delivering a discourse to a group of monks in a melodious voice. At the foot-hills of Gridhrakoot was a peacock sanctuary. The colourful dance of the peacock would sometimes slow down due to the non-appearance of the peahen and sometimes get disturbed at the kiss of her beak. In the deer park nearby lay herds of ruminating deer. A doe was gazing fascinated at her own image in the clear waters of the Sumagadhi lake.

Gautam's tall body exuded the radiance of *sadhana*, in his half-closed eyes was the shadow of dusk and his swan-like palm was bestowing the blessing of peace.

"What is the great sorrow for which you have undertaken this arduous *sadhana*, prince ?" Bimbisar enquired politely.

Gautam smiled and said "I have taken *sanyas* and undertaken this arduous *sadhana* to find out the root cause of sorrow and to search for its solution."

Bimbisar laughed loudly and said "The cause is obvious. But how can you search for its solution in this Saptaparni cave ? Come to the merry-making mansion of Rajagriha. In the frothing wine and dancing women of Magadh you will find the solution to all sorrow."

Bimbisar laughed again in innocent mirth. The listless shadow of dusk in the half-closed eyes of Gautam turned grave and awful like the silent darkness of night.

After a short silence Gautam said, "This yearning cannot be pacified by lust, king."

The sterile silence of his prison was echoing in what he said.

Ah ! Thirst was tearing Bimbisar's throat to pieces.

The jingling anklets on the feet of the playful Sumagadhi were now silent. Her once *kajal* lined eyes were now lined with the blackness of death. In the drinking bowl of frothing wine were the bubbles of poison. Who was coming with jingling feet ? Koshala Devi; Maharani !

No, another guard of the prison had come to relieve the one guarding it till then. It was the sound of the iron chain; not the jingling of anklets. Maddened by unbearable thirst. Bimbisar bit his own arm like a wounded beast.

(2)

Ajatashatru was staring fixedly at the mountain range bordering Rajagriha through a window in the palace. Rani Bajra Devi, about to give birth, was lying on the couch. Her body looked like a stream flowing through a desert. Flocks of pigeons were

flying in and out of the pigeon-house. The peacock was dancing under the trees in the garden.

"Maharaj !", Bajra Devi called in an exhausted voice.

Sitting by the side of the bed Ajatashatru stroked her wet cheeks gently and said "Tell me, Bajra".

Taking his hand in hers, Bajra said, "Tell me Maharaj, will this child be a son or a daughter ?"

Ajatashatru got up feeling quite distrurbed.

Bajra repeated the cruel question.

Ajatashatru left her bed-side and rushed to his own private chamber. Bajra Devi let out a yell of pain

Son ! Before Ajatashatru's moist eyes rose the dark dungeon of Rajagriha. With fetters on his hands and feet. Bimbisar was shrieking pathetically in the pangs of starvation.

That cruel prediction for the future–Bajra Devi's first-born son would kill his father. Ajatashatru's face hardened. Should he imprison Bajra who was in travail and kill the new-born in the darkness of the prison ? Was it difficult for Ajatashatru to wipe out both the past and the future in this manner with his own hands ? The past was dying in the prison. And the future ! But the present, sans past and future, had no existence.

Ajatashatru's son Udayi and after him, three descendents of the sakya dynasty had all killed their fathers. Enraged by this, the people had installed Sirhunag, king of Kashi, on the throne of Magadh.

Braja's yells were heard. Heart-rending cries let out in the pangs of labour; creation torturing and tormenting the creator and tearing and shattering her womb to reveal itself.

On a certain day in the past there was mirth and festivity in every street of Rajagriha on the orders of Bimbisar. Ajatashatru had heard this from his nurse. That was the day he was born. Now every nook and corner of the palace was echoing the pathetic cries of Bajra. The creator is the slave of her own creation, entirely at its mercy. Yet there is so much joy and pride in creation. Ajatashatru's heart was filled with the joy of fatherhood without his being aware of it.

Ajatashatru looked back on hearing the sound of foot-falls in his chamber Chanda, the guard of the prison, had entered and was waiting for his orders.

"What news, Chanda ?" asked Ajatashatru.

Chanda replied. "On the king's orders not even a drop of water had been given for three days. Today is the fourth day."

Ajatashatru's face hardened again "Thereafter ?", he asked Chanda in an angry tone.

Chanda said "Pathetic shrieks "alas son ! alas Rajagriha"! were heard at first."

From the queen's chamber inside were heard the blowing of the conch and other auspicious sounds. Bajra's cries had been silenced since long. Basumati, the mid-wife came running and announced. "Good news, Maharaj. The queen has given birth to a son. Please send for the minister.in-chief and issue orders for celebration."

"What are my orders, Maharaj ?" Chanda was saying.

Ajatashatru first looked at Basumati and then at Chanda. Then he rushed out like a mad man. Dashing through court-yards and corridors and springing down steps, he ran like one

gone mad and stopped before the entrance of the prison. The guard bowed to him.

"Open the door," Ajatashatru ordered him.

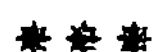
Two strong iron gates opened with a grating sound. It was pitch dark inside. Ajatashatru descended the dark stairs and entered the prison.

The father in him had now discovered fatherfood.

Father is always generous, forgiving and merciful. Ajatashatru was going to bury his head in his lap like an innocent child and implore his forgiveness.

But he had come too late. Bimbisar's emaciated lifeless body was lying on the stony court-yard of the prison. Tormented by the pangs of hunger in the last moments of his life he had bitten his own arm like a wild animal hit by the hunter's arrow. Blood dripping from the wound had clotted.

From the palace was heard the repeated blowing of the conch announcing the birth of the new born child.



Cycle Thief

"If 1949 is taken as the base year, the cost of living index for the current year has come down from 403.4 to 380.5. The Planning Commission had shown in their report that there is all-round progress in India during the current year, basing on a lot of facts and evidence."

Rajendra or Raju was reading the newpaper.

"India has to be converted into a powerful nation."

"Prime Minister's speech while inaugurating the Jai Hind Football Team."

One more speech !

"India will bring peace to the world."

"Finance Minister's three-hour long speech while inaugurating a tea-shop in Cuttack city–India's morality is an example to the whole world".

Raju had picked up that three-day old newspaper lying in a corner of the waiting room and was reading it with concentration. Sitting in the shade of a banyan tree by the side of the road in front of the Secretariat Raju was chewing grass, smoking *bidis* and reading the paper.

The long blades of grass when chewed tasted sweet. Had Madhu Babu become caste-conscious ? The black cow ate grass, its milk was sweet. The reason is obvious !

The poster of the latest Hollywood movie "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" had come out. Hollywood, the fairyland. What was the meaning of blondes ? Girls ! The poster featured two girls with ample bottoms, standing with their thighs at right angles. They were clad in miniskirts.

The clock in the church struck one. It was lunch-break for the officers and cars were coming out of the Secretariat one after another.

Clerks take a full meal sharp at nine in the morning. But ministers, officers, cerks all take their lunch after one. To take lunch at one was a fashion with beaurocrats. In the villages too, labourers who toil in the fields return home for lunch at the same time–rice soaked in water overnight with fried leafy vegetables, onion and stewed crab. The Finance Minister could declare in America without fear of contradiction "Even very poor agricultural labourers in Orissa take a four-course lunch !" In the first course he takes rice soup or water strained from cooked rice, in the second course rice with green vegetables, in the third onion and chilli salad and finally crabs in the fourth, just like oysters.

An interview was to be held that day for a post of diarist in the Secretariat. Raju had come with his B.A. Certificate, a bunch of testimonials and hope in his heart.

Raju had come committing to memory names like Tensingh, Ho Chi Min, Mao.se-Tung and such people with many facts about the progress brought about by the five-year plan and many details about the community development project at

the tip of his tongue. He had come wearing a clean white shirt, seeking the blessings of Goddess Mangala with her *prasad* in his pocket. But fortune smiled on a distant, far-removed relative of the Deputy Secretary. After the interview he had come out and was sitting under the banyan tree leaning against its trunk-chewing grass, smoking *bidis* and re-reading the old newspaper which he had collected from the waiting room to improve his chances in the general knowledge test. The purpose was only to pass time, hanging heavily in his hands.

Time passed slowly. It was not yet two. All the roads in the city were the same-extending like the tentacles of an octopus. On the roads were passing cars, cycles and pedestrians and high on the sky above were floating some white clouds. All were going about their business. Only Raju was feeling restless under the banyan tree like a dying fish dangling on the hook. He could not pass time. A black ribbon of nicotine had come out of his *bidi*. He once again glanced through the columns of the paper.

"Cycle theft in the city. From our city correspondent."

Cycle theft has become rampant in the city. Only yesterday four cycles had been stolen from different parts of the city. Police officers say that no theft is as easy as cycle theft. But catching a cycle thief is more difficult than catching other thieves. The police have cautioned cyclists that each one guarding his own cycle is the only remedy to cycle theft."

Raju read the news "Police officials say that no theft is easier than cycle theft" again, not once but four times.

Another great man had said "Theft is the art of taking, fetching and keeping."

Raju looked in the direction of the Secretariat. Hundreds of cycles lined the boundary wall. In the cycle-stand too were hundreds of cycles like a herd of goats in a shed:

Raju proceeded to the Secretariat. The cycle stand was a shed to the south of the gate. A peon or watchman was sitting on a stool inside the shed reading a book. One could enter the shed without catching his eye. But as Raju moved towards the shed he was arrested by the peon's coughing. Was it possible to take away a cycle unnoticed when there was a peon to keep watch ?

But the man was reading the book as if he had seen nothing; may be to indicate to Raju that he was so absorbed in reading that he hardly looked at the cycles. But Raju had no other alternative than to steal a cycle.

The peon coughed again. Why was he coughing ? Probably to warn him. Raju turned back disappointed. But a constable was standing near the gate chatting with some one. So he did not dare to go there. The constable turned and looked at him. Raju's heart-beat shot up. He was undone ! How could the constable know that he had gone there to steal a cycle ?

There was no way to retreat. Raju stopped and mustering up courage moved forward. The watcher of the cycles was an old man with a face like an idiot's, with sunken cheeks and graying moustache. His spectacles were tied with a string to one ear. The hair forming a circle round his bald pate was graying too. Raju glanced at him through the corners of his eyes as he passed him. He was reading a devotional book with great concentration. His pale, emaciated and weary face reflected the peace of happiness and tolerance. Was he looking at him ? Raju cast a backward look at him. No: he was reading

and nodding. Raju came out through another door of the shed and sighed with relief.

The clock struck five. On another day after a long fast since the previous night he would have been worn out with hunger, exhaustion and frustration. But today he had found the solution to his problem; sighted the shore of the limitless ocean. So he did not feel the pangs of hunger, the numbness of exhaustion or the weariness of disappointment.

Raju was putting up in the city with a distant uncle. The uncle's house was two miles away.

Police officers had said "No theft is as easy as cycle theft. But catching a cycle thief is more difficult than catching other thieves."

While the aged peon was absorbed in reading the book he could have easily smuggled out a cycle. But that requires courage which he did not have, good for nothing coward he was. He kicked a stone lying on the road to give vent to his frustration.

The uncle's house came within sight–a structure of mud walls and thatched roof. There was a drum-stick tree at the middle of the entrance in one wall, taken as a partition. So the rent for that "two-roomed" house measuring seven feet by five feet was twelve rupees per month. The drum-stick tree provided vegetables for half the month. The uncle had four school-going sons and two daughters aged eight and fifteen. When the boys were at school and the girls were slogging in the house, he would be sitting under the tree with a stick and a kerosene tin to scare away the monkeys. After his departure for office the girls would keep watch. When the boys returned from school it would be their turn to watch. Raju had incurred the displeasure of his

aunt by avoiding that work. His uncle was a lower division clerk in some office. Propitiating the gods and flattering his bosses, he had got promoted as an upper division clerk last year only to be reverted to his former post for inefficiency. He had to maintain a family of eight on a salary of seventy rupees. Now Raju was also with him and his daughters were growing up.

His uncle was returning from the office with his umbrella under his right arm and a small pumpkin and some edible leaves in the other hand. He stooped and entered the house. Raju was about to enter when he heard his aunt's high-pitched voice from inside the house.

"Look, I have repeatedly cautioned the children that monkeys are coming every minute. The drum-stick tree is laden with bunches of green fruits and they will destroy everything if you don't keep watch. I dozed off for a little while and the darling daughter got busy combing her hair. The monkeys came and ravaged everything. Your father has not found a husband for you. Who is the lover for whom you are dressing up ? Can't you die ? Let that Raju come. The lame leper is camping here as if his father's money is with us."

His uncle come out and saw that Raju was standing there and looking in. He could not face Raju for shame. He went in and whispered to his wife. "Shut up, Raju is standing there. Should we say such things just because bad luck has brought him here ?"

His uncle's face was just like that of the watchman of the cycle stand. Maintaining a family of eight on an income of seventy rupees at the age of fifty had taught him patience, fortitude and sympathy for other unfortunate people.

Raju entered the house.

"Did you get the job, Raju ? Was not the interview today ?", his uncle asked him.

"Yes; probably it will be fixed up in two or three days."

He was worn out with hunger. A crow was cawing from a branch of the drum-stick tree. To please his aunt he picked up a rod and hopped around the tree, saying "The crow is tearing up the flowers, so many bunches have been lost."

His unlcle's daughter Sebati was sobbing inside the house. To please his wife his uncle threw a hint to Raju that he should make some other arrangement for his stay and said "My salary is only seventy rupees and there are eight mouths to feed. Two stalks of green costs two paise and a small pumpkin costs an anna."

Raju did not know what to say. Commenting on the price of green vegetables, he said "Do you know, uncle only we think these are cheap. But in the hotels abroad these are sold at high price. They call it asparagus as I have read in an English book."

But his aunt said, "Why should people who eat without paying bother about the price of vegetables ?"

He had committed a great blunder. He did not know what to say thereafter to please his aunt. If only a monkey would come.

The following day....

The watchman was at the same place reading the same book. The pages of the book stained with oil and dust had turned yellowish and the print was invisible at many places. Raju passed by him coughing. The watchman was coughing yesterday. Raju was anticipating him today.

Hearing his cough the watchman looked up and cast an innocent, stupid look at him. Raju walked on haughtily, puffing his chest and pulling up his shirt collar around his neck. He was fearless today. After a few moments he looked back and saw that the watchman had started nodding again.

Raju stopped for a second. At the main gate of the Secretariat an armed constable was standing like a statue. But was it difficult to lift a cycle from the cycle stand ? After all Police officers had said that no theft is so easy as cycle theft. But what would be the plight of the watchman thereafter ? When asked to explain he could only stand and stare through his spectacles. May be he would say "I was reading a devotional book" and the officer taking him to task, would snap. "Alright; you are fired. Stay at home and read." How may children he had ? Probably half a dozen ! Raju looked back again. The watchman had dozed off sitting on the stool and leaning against a pillar. The book was in his lap and his spectacles were slowly slipping down his nose.

Man though worn out by thirst will not drink water from the drain. To commit theft ! What a shame ! Raju went back and sat under the banyan tree.He started chewing grass and smoking *bidis*.

In the past children in the village school used to recite the following stanza composed by Chanakya, every day at sunset.

"The king is honoured in his kingdom.
A scholar is honoured everywhere.
Like mother should be another's wife.
Like stone is other men's wealth";

Raju got up. The watchman could give another explanation–that he had left the shed for just five minutes for easing. When he came back he had checked the number of cycles in the shed and found it short by one. He thought that the owner of the cycle had taken it away. How could he know that within five minutes, before one could bat an eye-lid some one would lift a cycle and vanish ? Police officers have said that no theft is easier than cycle theft and nothing more difficult than catching a cycle thief. Chanakya was wiser in the art of goveranance than Megasthanese. When Megasthanese came to India people never bolted their doors before going to sleep. Perhaps the people were so poor that thieves did not consider it worthwhile to enter a house for stealing. If Chanakya had been alive now he would have written.

"The Minister is honoured in his state.

The cheat is honoured everywhere.

All women are like wives.

Another's wealth is one's own."

Raju returned to the cycle stand of the Secretariat. The watchman was pacing in the shed. To escape his notice, Raju sat under the boundary wall for easing but it immediately occurred to him that to soil the Secretariat premises might be an offence and the police might arrest him. Then he shuddered as he thought of what he might see in the face of his aunt in the morning.

Raju returned to his old post under the banyan tree and again came back to the cycle stand. The watchman was sipping tea from a glass. Like the cat stealthily moving round the mouse before pouncing upon it, Raju moved around the cycle stand. Would the owners have left them without locking ? He saw a green Rally and an old Phillips. The seat was partly damaged,

the bell had no cap and the pedal was tied up with a strip of cloth; companion of some cursed being on the roads not worth stealing. There was another with worn out tyres but not quite bad.

Raju started on hearing some incoherent talk. A a short distance a mason was white-washing the wall perched on a ladder. A female worker was standing on a lower step of the ladder holding up a bucket of lime. As the girl lifted the bucket her sari covering her chest kept slipping down and the mason watching that was passing some remarks. Shameful ! No luck that day. People were coming one by one to take their cycles. Raju left with a sigh, glancing at the mason and the girl.

Then the day after...

Raju was sitting under the banyan tree weighing the pros and cons of the morality of stealing. The watchman was sitting at the usual place reading the same book. Theft meant appropriating the property of another. No one will deny that it is a despicable act. What one lacks one snatches from another. People are compelled to steal because they are lacking. But why do they suffer this deprivation ? There is the rub ! Are not the people, who deprive others, thieves ? But the theft they commit has legal sanction. Robbery in broad daylight, after throwing dust in the eyes of people, was strength and gain through intelligence. But to pluck a pumpkin from some one's backyard at night when all are sleeping, amounts to stealing. If a monkey did it, it was not objectionable but if man, the monkey without tail, were to do it he lands in the lock-up. Even stealing a pumpkin means imprisonment for two months. But leaders are plundering now because they had gone to jail in the past ! So he would steal ! Theft is no doubt bad but the art of stealing is not bad if one knew how to take and keep.

Raju got up and proceeded to the cycle stand with quick steps. The watchman was nodding. Raju stealthily brought out a cycle from the rear of the shed. His body was trembling with excitement and the light became hazy. He mounted the cycle in one jump and pedaled away speedily.

The watchman was still nodding.

All roads were the same. Raju took a comparatively deserted road. The tyres of the cycle grated on the metalled road. The sunlight at mid-day was dazzling. The cycle dashed against a wall. Raju looked back. Nobody was following him. He sighed with relief and mounted it again. It was difficult to balance himself on the cycle. It was about to collide with a rickshaw.

"You are riding a cycle, so you can't see people."

The handle of his cycle had hit the body of a pedestrian.

"Please excuse me", Raju said.

A policeman blew his whistle. Raju's heart was pounding. Standing at the junction the traffic constable was signaling like a dancer–the road to the front is closed. Vehicles–heavy and light-were whizzing past on the road to his right. Raju moved to one side and got down from the cycle. Two policemen came from behind on cycles. The light turned to darkness before Raju's eyes. One of the constables got down from his cycle and the other while dismounting, placed his hand on Raju's shoulder. Raju felt as if a flame had descended on his body. He sat down on the ground. Just then the traffic signal changed and the constables mounted their cycles and rode away. Resting the cycle against a lamp-post Raju sat down on the road side.

It was evening. Sitting on a bench on the road before a tea-shop downtown. Raju was sipping tea. On another bench

were two others engaged in the usual gossip in which the owner of the tea shop also joined occasionally. A hawker passed on the road reading out headlines from the evening paper "Theft of cycle at 2 PM from the Secretariat." Raju bought a paper. His hands trembled as he took it. His tea was getting cold on the bench. A man came and sat on the bench near him and asked for a cup of tea. His ordering tea without any preliminary talk, customary in tea shops in the slums, seemed to indicate that he was not a local resident. Could he be a police detective ? Why was he glancing at him now and then ? To show off his unconern, Raju read out from the paper. "At 2 PM today a cycle was stolen from the cycle stand in old Secretariat. It was later recovered from a cycle shop in the city. The owner of the shop says it was not sold but only pawned. Though he can recognize the man who pawned it, he does not know his name and address. He says that for some years the man used to stop at his shop on his way to college for pumping the tyres and repairing them if there was a leakage. He had pawned it for thirty rupees.

The man was tall and there was the mark of a deep cut above his left eye-brow. This is all the information that the cycle shop owner could give. The police have seized the stolen cycle.

It was dangerous to halt there even for a moment. Raju ruffled his hair and covered the mark above his left eye-brow with it.

Three ten-rupee notes were rustling in his pocket. He did not have change to pay for the tea. He, therefore, took out a ten-rupee note and handed it to the tea vendor. Why did the man sitting near him watch him with keen hungry eyes when he was taking it out ? He had a black face with sunken cheeks and eyes. His moustache was like the whiskers of a tiger.

The vendor was vexed on getting a ten-rupee note and shouted "A tenner for tea worth six paise ! I have no change."

Two other customers looked at Raju on hearing this.

"O.K., give me a packet of cigarettes too, I too have no change", Raju said hesitantly.

Most unfortunate ! It was as if the vendor was proclaiming that Raju was changing the money he got by pawning the stolen cycle. Otherwise why should he offer ten rupees for a cup of tea ? Nobody does it in a slum.

The vendor went out to change the note.

To gather courage Raju carried a cigarette to hs lips and offered one to the stranger. The man moved closer to him and lit his cigarette. He would certainly arrest him then and there, otherwise why should he sit so close ? He probably feared that Raju would run away if he knew his intention. Still to indicate that he suspected nothing, Raju said aloud "The government is spending half the revenue on the police department and see how cycles are being stolen in the city in broad daylight."

The vendor gave him a handful of coins saying "Take it and count it. I have kept two annas."

Raju started counting. The man paid for his tea and left, probably to get the police for arresting him. He must make good his escape right now. He stuffed the coins in his pockets and left the place as fast as he could.

Raju took a dimly lit road, taking care to keep to the dark side of the road. In the dark sky were millions of stars. He sat down on a culvert on the road.

Where was he to go thereafter ? In the darkness Raju probed for the mark above his left eye-brow.

All roads looked alike. He slowly proceeded towards the station. If he could catch some train at mid-night he would be safe. He took out a cigarette and lit it.

But the two ten-rupee notes he still had were not in his pocket.

The sharp hungry eyes of the man sitting near him in the tea shop, surfaced in his mind. So he had picked his pocket and taken the notes.

Raju scratched the mark above his left eye-brow ferociously.

From the dark sky millions of stars were watching him like the vigilant eyes of police detectives. Raju stared ahead and looked back.

"If 1949 is taken as the base year the cost of living index has come down in the current year. We have to make India a strong and prosperous nation."

He also recalled the stupid, innocent, anemic eyes of the watchman of the cycle stand and his aunt's drum-stick tree. He shook his fist at the sky where innumerable stars were gaping, ready to swallow him. Oh ! God ! Was there a God ? or not ?



The Fugitives

Gentleman–one with a fat monthly income who has a wife and a family and a car; leads a peaceful carefree life. As his bank balance increases, so does his body fat. Then comes dyspepsia, diabetes and high blood pressure. That is life ! There is joy in life. But ideals. The blunt razor cut the chin below the lip; blood came out. Ideals bring envy, suffering and a slow agonizing death.

Kamal pulled out the handkerchief from his pocket to wipe off the blood. It exuded the strong scent of perfume-evening in Paris. In a corner Mallika had embroidered "O dearest !" Mallika had promised to come that day. With only half the face shaven Kamal went out and locked the door from outside. Then parting the broken railing of the window, he got into the room and lathered his face. He sighed with relief, pleased with his own cleverness. Having locked the door from outside, he could sleep peacefully warding off the intrusion by the house owner, the peddlar and Mallika.

"Kamal, the golden lotus of my myriad dreams."

That evening Mallika was lying on his chest, in a lonely corner of the park. He had said, "Mallika, I don't believe in love.

Man has no yearning, no desire, no love. His role is only to sow the seed. For man love is an impediment, marriage is a fetter. But woman wants creation and for creation she needs her man. So she has so much yearning, desire and love for him. But man calls such surrender love. I hate surrender, Mallika."

"You are very cruel, Kamal, you cannot understand my suffering and distress due to my love for you."

The blood stains on Mallika's petticoat were embroidery to Kamal.

Mallika was a lady police sub-inspector with a large bottom, fallen breasts, dark complexion and protruding teeth.

Somewhere the clock struck nine. Kamal picked up a pencil and wrote down the tasks for the day on a piece of paper. First of all he had to catch that rascal Basant. He wanted to smoke but did not have a cigarette. So he picked up a half-burnt cigarette from the ash-tray and lighted it.

"Basant, you are not merely stupid but an idiot. You had grabbed some tutions, the only source of your monthly income. How will you manage without them ?"

"True. I had not thought of that. But where there is no life and no freedom, there music has no place. Why do these girls learn music ? To accompany on the instrument some one gifted with a voice worse than a donkeys braying. I feel suffocated in their presence. Well, lend me twenty rupees. My landlord, the scoundrel, has taken away my harmonium and has his eye on my tabla and other instruments."

Kamal pushed back his hair. Six months had passed since then. No trace of those twenty rupees so far.Basant was also not to be seen.

He had to catch that fool today. First, Basant Das at house No. 3 Fish Market Lane. Then Sreepati Choudhuri, Lake Road. Through which nostril was he breathing ? The left ! Breathing through the left nostril on Monday was auspicious. O ! awesome Mother Kali ! It might be possible to persuade Sreepati Choudhuri to insure his life today ! Gentlemen are reportedly ready to take a policy for one lakh. Sustenance for a year ! The coat needed ironing but could still be worn. But Mallika had not yet come Weary Mallika in waning youth. Is beauty in the body or in the mind ? Marrying Mallika was not a bad idea. She might have slept with many but she still had fragrance. That was sufficient.

Was it already eleven ? Then Mallika would not come that day. Kamal wiped his face with the same hand-kerchief which emitted the scent of evening-in-Paris. He felt Mallika's cool, tender touch. He was still breathing through the left nostril.

(2)

He was undone His right foot collided with a hard stone lying on the road resulting in a crack on the sole of his shoe near the big toe. He cursed the Corporation. All along the road were stones and knee-deep pot holes. Had it been a cut on the foot, all that was required was a little dressing with iodine and cotton at the out-door of the dispensary. But to get the shoe patched would cost at least eight annas, the price of a packet of cigarettes (a packet of cigarettes means ten minutes of sweet smoke) or four cups of tea. After the next turning in Fish Market Lane was the Broadway restaurant. Under the coat some insect was pricking him with long sharp stings driven by hunger or the pangs of labour. A cup of tea was badly needed to sooth his

numb frayed nerves. Two annas for a cup of tea, eight annas for a packet of cigarettes and four annas for bus fare, adding up to fourteen annas. If he bought only half a packet of cigarettes and walked to the house of Sripati Choudhuri without taking the bus, there would be a net saving of eight annas. But he had to take a cup of tea. So he entered the restaurant.

(3)

The wide road; boys offering to polish shoes everywhere. His shoe had a crack exposing the big toe. Only a short distance to reach the fish market and then he would be safe from the pestering shoe-shine boys.

He reached No. 3 Fish Market Lane. But there was no trace of Basant Das. There was a lock on the door. A peddler was sitting on a bench before a tea shop, drinking tea, probably waiting for Basant. He had come a long way but the rascal had given him the slip. The house of Sripati Choudhury was still four miles away.

He was accosted by Basant's landlord. Perhaps he might be able to give him some information about his whereabouts.

"Namaskar. You are Kamal Babu ? See what that Basant Babu has done, calling himself a gentleman. The rent is in arrears for months And now..."

"Where is he ? I am also looking for him."

"Looking for Basant Babu ? I had taken away his harmonium. Now having left his old tabla at my house he has vanished saying that he is getting married and would clear the rent after marriage."

Basant's marriage ? When ? With whom ? Mallika too had been talking of marriage.

"Kamal, let us set up our dream house far, far away from the commotion of the city. The two of us in a small bungalow with a river in front and the hills behind."

On that evening Mallika had come to Kamal with the same old request. But he deliberately tried to hurt her by asking. "Tell me Mallika, with how many men had you thought of setting up this dream house before coming to me ?"

Mallika was exceptional. Suffering hurt with a smile was her special characteristic. Marriage was her goal. To attain that goal she was prepared to brave any calamity, hurt and humiliation. She had done up her hair in a bun and pinned a red flower on it.

"Kamal, body and life are two separate entities", Mallika had said, "May be I have searched for life in many bodies. Now my body has withered. This thirty-year old body cannot have any attraction for a young man like you. I have come to you today beseeching that life."

Her body was exuding the soft sweet smell of evening-in-Paris.

Fish Market Lane, Serpentine Lane, Grey Road, Moti Ganj Street. Such a long distance.... Fish Market Lane seemed endless.

The clock in a pan shop showed fi ve minutes past one, the one in a restaurant fifteen minutes to one and Sethji's time-piece ten minutes past one. Going by the least common multiple, it was 1 PM.

Mallika, you and I... far far away from the city in some peaceful village surrounded by bamboo forests, with green fields extending to the horizon. That would mean surrender. There is peace in surrender and the pathos, torture and humiliation of self preservation are not there. Basant had chosen the right path. None can protect himself from the injuries of life. The struggle is in vain. Om Shanti ! shanti ! shanti ! Wasteland.. the lush green culmination of the dry desert !

(4)

Only a short distance. After crossing that turning in Moti Ganj Street one reaches Lake Road No. 10 Lake Road is Choudhury Mansion, residence of Sripati Choudhury, the favourite son of Lady Luck. He could certainly take an insurance policy of one lakh. He would offer a cigarette which would be accepted with thanks. Kamal would persuade him saying. "You know Mr. Choudhury, the great poet Bharavi has said–life is like a drop of water on the leaf of the lotus". (Was it Bharavi who said it ? Or Vyas ? Kalidas ? Shankaracharya ?) You must have heard that in America girls insure their hair and even moles on their cheeks."

Kamal lit a cigarette to energise his body and mind. It was the extended evening of the last days of spring. Lake Road was lined with *deodars* on either side. Eternity seemed to have fallen asleep there; no commotion, no shoe-shine boys: only the rustling of the leaves of *deodars* and peace– only peace. There were no hurdles, no collision, no pot-holes or depressions. The course of life was smooth. A costly car moved past Kamal noiselessly.

The huge Choudhury Mansion was before him. A durwan (gate keeper) was nodding at the gate. Kamal pulled the coat tight around his body, pressing away the creases with his hands. A car honked from inside. The Gorkha durwan, shaken out of his sleep, stood up, salaamed and opened the gate. A huge black car emerged and was driven away, leaving behind red dust and dry deodar leaves.

"What do you want ?", the Gorkha asked Kamal resuming his seat. His high-pitched voice showed his annoyance in being rudely woken up.

Kamal felt like saying : "I want your head."

Lighting a *bidi* the durwan said. "The sahib has gone out. You cannot meet him."

Kamal wanted to hit him on the nose and flatten it.

(5)

Thereafter a journey of five miles. His legs were aching. He had to make another attempt on the following day. He had no money except four annas in his pocket. He would have to take the bus next day. The busfare was four annas. Some one threw a handful of groundnut shells on him. Kamal looked up and saw that at a short distance somebody was sitting on the boundary wall and happily munching groundnuts. Kamal wanted to pull him down by the feet. He had just taken a few steps forward when the man jumped down to the foot-path. In the light of the roadside lamp Kamal saw Binod standing before him, dramatically aiming a groundnut at him.

"Binod, what were you doing sitting on the boundary wall ?" Kamal asked him.

"Practising yoga", said Binod.

"You mean...?"

"I mean yoga. I know the past, the present and the future", I say.

Just now you had gone to meet Sreepati Choudhury to make him insure his life.But as soon as you reached his gate he left for an evening ride in his car."

"Surprising !" said Kamal in an amazed tone. "How could you know all this, Binod ?"

Binod looked at him with compassion and said "I was sitting here and observing everything, you fool. You went up to his gate, immediately a car came out. Then the durwan threw you out and you came back looking crestfallen. To infer all this is as simple as saying that two plus two is equal to four."

"But what is the purpose of your coming here covering a distance of five miles and munching groundnuts sitting on the wall ?", asked Kamal.

They started walking together.

Binod put a groundnut in Kamal's hand and said," Bad news, brother. You know Mallika, sub-inspector in the Women Police Department ? Gets a salary of two hundred rupees and rent-free quarters. Carefree life ! I was going to propose marriage to her. What if she is thirty plus and has no beauty...."

"Dark with fallen breasts and protruding teeth", commented Kamal.

"But all my problems would have been solved by marrying her", said Binod. "I have started a research on the "culture of

aborigines" and if I can complete it without any difficulty, there would be no dearth of money thereafter."

"But why should Mallika marry a good-for-nothing like you ?"

"Everything on this earth is relative, you fool. I may be good for nothing in your opinion but do you know what Mallika tells me ? Binod, I have come to you with a prayer from myheart. What is the attraction in this thirty–year old body ?"

"Then what happened ?", asked Kamal in a hurt voice.

"All these days I have been dodging and avoiding Mallika to escape the torment of her heart-felt request", said Binod. "But I finally decided to marry her only to learn that she has already got married."

"Mallika has got married ? When ? To whom ?" Kamal queried, shocked out of his wits.

"I don't know when." replied Binod. "You know that beggar Basant Dash ? He was teaching her to play sitar. Taking advantage of that association, Basant has gained her over and married her. They have left for their honeymoon yesterday."

Kamal felt desperate. Now there was no hope of marrying Mallika or recovering the twenty-rupees he had lent Basant. If asked to return it Basant would say that it had been treated as his wedding present. Besides, Kamal had taken more money from Mallika. But he could utilize the occasion to insure Basant's life. He would say–Look, Basant, I am saying this as your well-wisher. You have got married and started life. Marriage involves a lot of responsibility and is fraught with difficulties. You should insure your life as a precaution against all that."

A nail had fallen out of his shoe and he could not walk. Plugging the shoe with a piece of paper lying on the road rolled tight, he walked on.

Binod ws saying "In that sorrowful mood I had come far from the city and was sitting on the wall eating groundnuts brooding over the injustice in the world."

But Kamal could not take it so stoically or forgive Basant who had not repaid the loan and had married Mallika, keeping everybody in the dark. He felt betrayed.

A little ahead was the Bolward restaurant, famous fot its fish cutlets. The smell of that delicacy was spreading in the air. Both the friends inhaled it. Kamal casually searched for ten annas in his pocket. The rage of hunger was gnawing at his stomach.

Binod placed his hand on Kamal's shoulder and said. "Come, along, Kamal. I am very hungry."

Without waiting for his reply, Binod entered the restaurant. Kamal followed him. They occupied adjacent seats at a table in a corner.

Binod put his elbow on the table, thumped it and called out "Boy, boy."

"My pocket is empty, Binod I have nothing", Kamal faltered.

"It is not easy to deceive me, Kamal. I have heard money jingling in your pocket. See my pocket."

Binod turned both the pockets of his shirt inside out dropping some groundnut shells to the ground.

Kamal gnashed his teeth and cursed. Binod-rascal, dacoit, good for nothing; dragging me to the restaurant.

Taking advantage of friendship, only to snatch away the last few coins I have.

The boy had been standing there for some time waiting to take the order.

Feeling helpless Kamal said. "Four cutlets."

A Hindi gazal was being broadcast on the radio and the stupid Binod was beating time on the table.

The waiter brought two plates with two cutlets on each plate and Binod started eating ravenously.

(6)

Emerging from the restaurant the two friends lighted cigarettes.

"Now what ?", asked Kamal.

"An aimless journey", replied Binod.

Kamal thought of that dirty rented house by the side of a narrow lane in the slum. The owner of that house must be sitting there right now, lying in wait for him. He did not have the courage to go home.

"Really our journey is aimless", he said.

Binod took him by the arm and dragged him to a lane, saying "I am thoroughly exhausted, Kamal."

"But whither ?", asked Kamal. "Entry into the park is barred after twelve midnight. We will be beaten up by the police."

"No, not to the park; to the refugee camp ahead," said Binod.

(7)

The refugee camp had once been a godown. It was a large tented hall. About forty families had taken shelter there. It was very hot inside. So the gound in front of it was bustling with the life and activitries of forty families. Forty ovens were burning each with a family sitting around it. Pots of rice were boiling on some and chapathis were being baked on others. Children cried, elders shouted and bangles jingled. Binod lay down on the grass with his arms under his head. Kamal did the same with his shoes under his head. He also took off his coat and kept it under his head. There was peace all around-the soft evening breeze, millions of stars on the sky, soothing darkness and the lively evening bustle of the metropolis in the distance.

At a short distance a woman was baking chapathis on an oven. She was surrounded by four children eyeing the food greedily like starving puppies. The woman was like the embodiment of patience–the patience of the all-enduring earth.

She has left behind a broken home but has no sorrow or fear, reflected Kamal. In the midst of all calamities, sorrow and misery man survives and will always survive. The woman broke a chapathi into four pieces gave one piece to each child and started baking another.

Binod had started snoring.

(8)

Kamal too had fallen asleep.

They have no complaint if they are called fugitives or beggars Binod was sleeping but if awake, he would have sat

up with the boldness of a hundred lions and said– "I have gone through the history of mankind from the earliest stage till now and seen that sorrow, misery, deception and humiliation are the constant companions of those who have kept themselves aloof without surrendering themselves to the world and society. But they have lit the light of freedom by burning themselves to facilitate the search for the new order. In that light the ancient earth has discovered itself in a new form epoch after epoch." May be they are cursed creatures. The world had knocked at their doors again and again in the form of the ugly, aging Mallika with pathetic entreaties of life. But they had been protecting themselves from the world and dodging it. May be they are mad. But Binod has collected irrefutable proof from history in support of his argument.

Binod was sleeping. Kamal was snoring.

The woman had finished baking chapathis. Her children had gone to sleep since long.

***

Ghania's Ganesh Chaturthi

Like the black stripes on the body of a cheetah scattered grey clouds had appeared on the sky. Soon the colour would change from grey to pale golden yellow. Morning starts in the same manner every day in Bauri Sahi, the colony of low caste people. But it had the charm of novelty for Ghania though he had seen the same sight umpteen times before. Fifteen-year old Ghania was an orphan who had none in the world except a sixty-year old grandmother. His father Baraju Mallick had been bitten by a black cobra and died the year before last. His mother had died of gastritis before that. So Ghania had nobody to call his own except his grandmother.

Yawning and stretching his body Ghania came and sat on the veranda. The goats were bleating to be taken out of the shed. His old grandmother was coughing inside the house. She would start coughing in the early hours of the morning and would not be able to get up from the bed till the day was quite warm. The grey clouds had disappeared and it seemed that some unseen hand had cast a golden net in the sky. But the dog Bula was still in deep slumber. He was trying to get more sleep, curling up his body which was a bag of bones, having lost most of the fur. He would wag his half-cut tail now and then to drive the flies away.

"Bula ! Bula !" called Ghania.

Bula opened his eyes slightly, looked at Ghania and closed them again. He was not a starving beggar like the crow or the bani to go scouting for food as soon as it dawned. He would sleep till 1 PM when Ghania's grandmother would start sweeping the veranda and dealt him two blows with the broom. Then he would get up leisurely and set out on his daily round of the village wagging his tail. He would roam about houses, streets and garbage heaps for a little peja (water strained after cooking rice) or the remnants in the leaf plates. Sometimes he would be hit or stoned. He had got used to all that. If he was hit hard, he would run away howling or stare at the tormentor and walk away slowly. There was a message in that look-hit me again if you like, but it is the sufferer and not the tormentor who is great. On one occasion when he had put his head in an earthen pot containing peja, some one had poured hot peja on his body Half his body had been burnt but he did not die. He survived though with no fur on one side of his body. He was in high favour with the naked street urchins of the village. They would put a halter round his neck and pull him about, ride on his back and occasionally throw him some food. Bula took it all in his stride. Three years ago Ghania had found a black pup, tied a strip of cloth round its neck and taken it home. His grandmother named it Bula. Since then he had been an inmate of Ghania's house. He got very little there except some blows with the old woman's broom. But such was his loyalty that if a cat happened to run through the veranda, he would shake up the entire colony with his barking. At least there was a handful of broken rice in Ghania's house and it may be stolen ! But if the cat came hissing, ready to attack him, Bula would take shelter in some dark narrow passage.

Ghania tightened his clothes around his body. The morning breeze made him feel cold. Sitting on the drum-stick tree the crow was cawing loudly. Voices of tiny tots were heard from the far end of Bauri sahi. Ghania wondered what the children were up to so early in the morning. After some time a group of children came laughing and prattling carrying hooks and baskets. All the children in the village were in the group.

"Where are you going so early in the morning, kids ?", asked Ghania.

"Today is Ganesh Chaturthi", said one. "We are going to collect flowers. Have you got any in your colony ?"

Without waiting for his reply they proceeded on their way.

Before the veranda there were two *shefali* trees. Countless flowers had fallen from the trees and were scattered on the ground. The morning breeze was sweet with the soft scent of the flowers washed in the autumn dew. Those flowers are not used in pooja and are not picked up by any one. Like countless unwanted lives they bloom and flutter to the ground. Ghania picked up a handful from the ground and smelt them.

Warm sunlight had flooded the court-yard. The goats impatient to come out were bleating their heads off in the shed. Ghania opened the shed and pushed them out. His grandmother was sweeping the back-yard. After some time she would come and sweep the court-yard. While sweeping she would often squat on the floor overcome by intermittent fits of cough.

A group of Bauri youths on their way to Kalipokhari, stopped on seeing Ghania and said.

"Are you not going for work to Mahanpur, Ghania ? The foundation is being laid for the house of the village chief. Go, take you bath and set out. You have to cover two miles."

There were no clouds in the sky. The ground had cracked in the dry fields. The cattle were roaming about sniffing at the dry earth. There was no work for the labourers in the village. So they were walking miles and miles to reach any place where work was available and those youths were rushing to Mahanapur where the foundation was being for a house.

"Am I to go for work on Ganesh Chaturthi ?", Ghania said irritably.

Kanhu, older to him by four or five years, said "What is Ganesh Chaturthi to you ?" Braja added. "Oh ! what a scholar !" Another too made some sarcastic remark.

Bula was still sleeping. Ghania took out all his anger on Bula by throwing a stone at him, saying. "It is almost ten and the devil is still asleep." The stone hit Bula on a hind leg and he ran away howling with his leg up.

Enraged Ghania went in and sat on the veranda at the back. "What is wrong with you today ?", said the old woman. "You were to go to Mahnapur. Go and take your bath. It has already become burning hot."

It was like adding fuel to fire. Ghania flared up. "I am not going to work on Ganesh Chaturthi."

"What is Ganesh Chaturthi to you ?", said the old woman. "Only school-going children are to observe it."

"Why are you bothering me since morning", Ghania yelled as if he was about to kill her. "I am not going anywhere today."

Sweeping away goat–dung to one corner, the old woman said. "Well, don't go if you don't want to. But why are you jumping up to attack me like a biting monkey ? O Yama ! Why do you make me live and suffer, after taking my son ?" she started coughing and sat down. Ghania went out grumbling.

Ghania thought of his days in the village school. It was his father's ambition to educate him. Children of his caste would be engaged in grazing goats, plucking leaves for cooking, catching crabs and working in fields from the age of six or seven. But Ghania's father Baraju Mallick had taken him to the village school when he was six years old. He had bought a state, a piece of chalk and a primer for Gahnia.

Ghania clearly remembered the day he had accompanied his father to the school of the village master Bai Abadhan. When they reached there he was sitting on a torn blanket, leaning against the wall and nodding with his mouth open. By his side were two canes, a thin black-board and piece of chalk. He was being slowly woken up by the children reciting the multiplication table. Suddenly two flies few into his mouth and he sat up coughing. The children giggled and Baraju too laughed at the sight.

To be rudely woken up and the children's laughter was too much for Bai Abadhan. He picked up the cane and started firing questions of mental arithmetic. Without waiting for answers and even before they could answer, he started caning them right and left. None was spared.

Baraja placed the small bundle he had brought before the master, prostrated himself before him and humbly said. "Namaskar".

Looking at the bundle Bai Abadhan said "Who ? Baraju ? You have brought your son ? Alright; make him sit in the varanda. Today is Wednesday; auspicious for starting learning. What have you brought ?"

Baraju untied the bundle and said "We are poor labourers. What can we give you ?"

He had brought a small measure of fine rice, two tobacco leaves, *pan*, betel nuts, four brinjals, one coconut and turmeric powder. Bai Abadhan eyed then greedily. Then he called a pupil and said. "Here, Nath, run to my house and deliver these". As Nath picked up the bundle and was about to dash out, Bai Abadhan gave him a stroke on the back and roared. "Stop; you curse on the family ! You have touched the bundle and will contaminate my house with your clothes. Go naked."

The boy took off his clothes and fled with the bundle "Where is my fee ?", Bai Abadhan asked Baraju.

Baraju took out four annas from the pouch of his *dhoti* and placed them on the ground. Bai Abadhan counted and kept the coins.

Baraju said "I have to go for my work. I am going. Ghania will stay" Then he left.

"Sania", Bai Abadhan called a pupil.

Sania who was repeating consonants came and stood near him, waiting for his orders. Bai Abadhan said "Guide him to write Brahama, Vishnu, Maheswar." Then turning to Ghania "What is your name ?"

Ghania hung down his head and mumbled. "Ghania".

"You sit there on the veranda every day and repeat the lessons. You should not come in" Bai Abadhan instructed him.

Sania held his hand and made him write Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar on his slate.

Two years passed. Every month Baraju would come and place four annas before Bai Abahdan. On market days Ghania would get tabaccco and a few chillis for him. But there was hardly any progress in his learning. It was very hot in the morning in the front veranda. So Bai Abadhan had told him to sit in the shady veranda at the back and copy the lessons. Sitting there Ghania would catch butterflies or run after lambs or search for birds' nests in the deodar trees. He enjoyed the time he spent in the school. Once in a while when Bai Abadhan set out for he bamboo forest at the back, he would spot Ghania and put some questions. Ghania would stare dumbly. But Bai Abadhan could not touch and cane him. So he would summon some older pupil and order him to administer the punishment. But the star pupil too could not touch him. So he would take off his clothes and carry out the teacher's order. Scared out of his wits Ghania would cringe and say "I shall get tobacco leaves for you, sir." And Bai Abadhan, unable to resist the call of nature any further, would rush to forest.

After two years had passed in this manner Ghania stopped going to the school. Baraju said, "What is the use of low caste people like us going to school neglecting our livelihood ? "Ghania started taking care of goats Ganesh Chaturthi and Saraswati pooja used to be observed in the school during those two years. On those occasions he had taken offerings of money,

coconut and cucumber to Bai Abadhan. But he had not taken part in the pooja because he was an untouchable.

"Ghania ! Oh Ghania !"

Ghania started on hearing the call. He saw a group of children of his own Bauri caste coming with baskets and sticks.

"What is it ?" he asked them.

"We are observing Ganesh pooja in our school", one of them said, "Children of higher castes have plucked all he followers. You pluck some flowers for us."

"Ganesh pooja is meant for them. What is it to you ?", said Ghania.

"Ganesh pooja is for us too", the children said. "Our teacher has said that the country is free and we too can offer flowers to the Lord."

Ghania stood up like a warrior saying "Come along. I shall pluck lotuses and water lilies from the pond and fill your baskets."

The children followed him joyfully.

The village primary school was filled with lotuses and water lilies that day. Still Ghania was not satisfied. He climbed deodars and plucked a cartload of leaves. The school was decorated with streamers of leaves and flowers. Water lilies were hung all over the veranda. The young junior teacher was full of praise for the Bauri boys to the discomfiture of those from the higher castes. Sitting below the veranda Ghania was patting himself on the back on his cleverness as if his own success and glory were reverberating in the laughter of the children of his caste. It was his own offering of flowers to the Lord.

The pooja was over and coconuts were broken. Children of Bauri caste all broke coconuts into two halves in one stroke. But many boys of higher castes could not break them even after making two attempts, may be because they had been eating stealthily after taking the vow of fasting. Then followed the offering of flowers. As the flowers plucked by him were being showered on the Ganesh idol. Ghania's mind lifted with the joy of fulfillment.

Prasad was distributed to the children. The young junior teacher came out with the basket containing prasad. He saw Ghania sitting below the veranda and said "Here, Ghania, have some *Prasad.*"

"No, sir I am not a child", Ghania said hesitantly.

"You have done a lot of work today. You must have it", said the teacher.

Ghania received puffed rice, sesame ladoos, coconut, pieces of cucumber, banana and other items of *Prasad* in a corner of his *dhoti*.

It was getting late and Ghania returned home.

Bula happened to see him on the way, came running and twined about his legs. On another day Ghania would have given him a kick but that day he scattered a handful of puffed rice before him, saying "Eat it, Bula; it is the *prasad* of Ganesh."

Dancing with joy Bula licked and ate it. Such unexpected luck ! He was so happy.

As he reached Bauri sahi, Ghania could hear the old woman's voice "Ghania ! O Ghania ! O Yama ! you took the lives of others leaving me Ghania...."

Ghania entered the hut chewing puffed rice. Close on his heels came Bula happily eating whatever fell to the ground.

"It is already past two in the afternoon. Where were you raoming about hungry and thirsty ?", the old woman asked him.

"Don't you know it is Ganesh Chaturthi today ?"

"Ganesh Chaturthi is for school children. What is it to you ?"

Giving her *Prasad* in her cupped hands, Ghania said "Take this *Prasad*. I have brought it for you. Don't grumble."

The old woman put a sesame ladoo in her mouth, chewed it and said. "This is as hard as stone."

Bula was dancing about Ghania wagging his tail, Ghania threw him a handful of puffed rice and said, "There is fire in the devil's abdomen."

A sesame ladoo slipped from the old woman's mouth full of saliva and fell to the ground. Watching that Ghania burst into peals of laughter.



The Appointment Letter

Something happened quite unexpectedly in the drowsy silence of the previous night which had violently shaken up Sunand's being. The impact of that was being felt by him even in the morning.

Sunand had a vision of the moon the previous night in a manner least expected.

That is why Sunand says that life is moulded by certain sudden happenings like Newton's watching an apple fall to the ground.

Patches of the sky which were once visible through the window of the low, thatched tenement like broken pieces of porcelain had long since been shut out by the four-storeyed mansion of the new–rich trader of opium and illicit liquour. Simultaneously the moon too had bidden good-eye to Sunand's life.

But suddenly the previous night Sunand had got up from the bed and looked out through the window when he had a vision of the moon shining through the foliage of a tree by the side of the lane, reflected in the current of muddy water in the drain.

Every nerve in Sunand's body thrilled at the sight. He tried to wake up Surama several times. But poor Surama was sleeping like a log after a hundred cares and exertions during the day.

Ah ! it was strange; unforgettable. A faint beam of the moon had fallen on Surama's closed eye-lids. She had become younger by several years.

Once again in the morning mail there was a grey envelope. Surama had tremendous respect for such official letters. May be in that envelope was Sunand's appointment letter; the possibility of good days to come; the means to survive with a sigh of relief.

Surama brought the envelope to Sunand like one bringing some long–expected good news and said in an excited tone. "First tell me what you will give me; otherwise I will not give it to you."

Sunand could clearly see a part of the envelope in her hands crossed over the long curly hair cascading down her back.

Several envelopes like that could be found in the papers dumped on the table. This would add to the number. Thank God, Surama had never tried to read those letters.

Grey clouds had covered the sky. Sunand yawned lazily and tried to sleep closing his eyes. He knew very well what was in the envelope. So he felt no interest or eagerness to read it.

Surama put her cool palm on his hot cheek, shook him and said. "Far from giving me any reward for bringing such good news, you don't even thank me."

Opening his sleepy eyes and pretending to smile, Sunand said, "OK, thank you. But bring me a cup of tea."

Surama threw the envelope on his bed playfully, gently ruffled his hair and went to fetch tea.

Lying on the bed with his head resting on his arm like some sultan in the Arabian Nights, Sunand was watching Surama's playful demeanour with expert eyes and thinking that even then, she could be called by the old name "Sura" !

He had actually called out "Eh Sura !" without being aware of it.

As Surama looked back startled, Sunand threw the envelope in the heap of papers under the cot. Surama shrieked as if in agony. "You are throwing the letter away? I am telling you the truth–if you don't join the post, we cannot manage."

Sunand smiled and said "No; we cannot discard the letter".

Feeling relieved. Surama left.

Sunand sat up on the bed, yawned and mused. "Morale–self–confidence–the best assets and strength in life. This blind faith is the only weapon of those who are wounded and disarmed in the battle of life.

Churchill won the second world war with that weapon. The battle of life is just an abridged version of that war."

Surama had regained her confidence on seeing that grey envelope in that mail. That was clear from her behaviour.

That letter had restored confidence and assurance in Surama's mind. She was convinced that Sunand too was useful to society. His dreaming and writing poetry was also valued–

otherwise so many official letters would not have come to him. Those letters were precious assets and a consolation to Surama, like approaching foot-falls of happy times at the turning point in life.

xx xx xx

On the day Sunand, battered by the hard blows of life, ventured out of his dreamy ivory tower into the dusty road of reality, all his pride and confidence had vanished like dry leaves in the storm.

He was roaming about the market with the commodity of manuscripts of unwanted poems in his portfolio.

He had thought that his poems might reveal new limits of the experiences in life; invest bestial life with a new meaning and beauty.

But his wares were not vegetables, timber or iron, rice or salt, not even sand or pebbles.... So they were not wanted and had no value.

Poor Sunand had gone crazy under the torture of unemployment; otherwise would he roam about the market to sell poems ?

Finally Sunand reached the Employment Exchange. He wanted his strength to be utilized; to enrich society with his productivity.

Like the tail of an ancient reptile there was a long queue at the Exchange, extending beyond the gate, far into the foot-path.

Like a hungry snake the 'queue' was hissing, turning and wagging the tail, as if its age-old hunger would be satiated by swallowing the imposing building of the Employment Exchange.

As Sunand heaved a sigh of relief, after securing a place in that slowly extending tail of the queue, he was thrown to the ground by a strong push.

He saw a harsh deeply lined face from which two eyes burning like embers in their sockets, were glaring at him. "I had just left for a minute to get a cup of tea and he has usurped my place as if it were his paternal property", he cried showering sparks of fire from his eyes on Sunand.

Sunand lit a cigarette in a casual manner, took a few puffs and turning away from the queue facing the Employment Exchange, occupied a place in another queue.

Like the forked tongue of a serpent there were two queues merging at one end–so he had secured a place for himself in the queue on the other side of the road before the booking office of a cinema house.

It was the crowd–pulling fourth week of the Hindi movie "*Dil Ki Daku*" and the advertisement poster which carried the half-naked picture of a woman with high breasts hung there like a peace of fatty flesh in a butcher's shop. It was not the picture of a woman but a fleshy obscenity.

Watching that poster, hundreds of people standing in the queue were licking their lips hungrily.

Sunand who had joined that queue in his ignorance also licked his lips not in hunger but in thirst.

There were also long, extending queues before the godowns on the road side for rice, oil, sugar–all twisting and turning like the tail of a hungry serpent.

Sunand was moving forward mechanically in his queue which was extending at the back.

It was not waiting–in wait there is a thrust with a direction, an exciting desire. But this was like a frustrating, statue-like posture.

Sunand looked back startled by a strange fluttering touch on his neck. A middle–aged man had started reading the paper placing it on his back.

As Sunand looked back he smiled and said in a patronizing tone "Good afternoon."

Sunand responded casually turning away his face to conceal his irritation.

The gentleman standing behind enquired. "Are you a doctor ? Engineer ? Surgeon ? Dentist ? Designer ? Tracer ? Scientist ? None of thse ? Then are you a Typist or Stenographer ? Teacher ? Clerk ? or Accountant ? Not even these ? Then are you a Mason ? Mechanic ? Driver ? Oh. Not these too ! Then why are you standing in this queue ? You want a ticket for "*Dil Ki Daku* ? A movie worth seeing again and again; because the heroine Neela Kumari is superb in her bathing suit (her breast fully exposed). Moving about like that in the beach had not been seen in Hindi movies before. Hence this rush, sir. What ? You have not come to see the film ? But want a ticket ? I sell tickets at forty percent commission. Only forty percent ! Why are you silent ? Rubbish !"

Sunand could stand it no longer. He suddenly broke the queue and moved forward. By now he had mastered the technique of securing a place in the queue !

But what was he ? What was his introduction ? Suddenly Sunand had lost all confidence in himself.

The pressure from behind was mounting in the queue.

The man standing before him took out a cigarette from his pocket but he had no match-box. Sunand took out his match box and offered it to him. He lighted his cigarette with total indifference and returned it to Suand. The smoke of tobacco polluted the surroundings beyond endurance.

Indescribable waiting, unbearable delay ! Those who were going into the Exchange Office were taking unreasonably long time to register their names. Some one in the queue started a discussion on sexual relationship. In the seemingly endless waiting and nasty surroundings, the dirty discussion and loud laughter spread from one end to the other like wild fire.

He too could join that gang and lose himself in it. But the repulsive smell of the smoke from cheap cigarettes coupled with the mean comments on sex had created a bestial environment which was driving him out. He was a total misfit there.

"Who are you ? What are you ?" A man in the queue enquired sympathetically.

Ah ! What was he ? What was his profession ? What was his source of livelihood ? What was his utility to society ? Who could answer these questions ?

Sunand wiped the sweat off his cheeks and looked up at the sky. Like a blue island in the ocean of the grey cloudy sky was a small patch of clear blue with a flock of cranes slowly floating away in the background.

He too was a swan with the broken wing driven away by the cranes.

A window seemed to have suddenly opened in the closed chamber of the dark earth at the tender touch of the

flock of cranes which momentarily expanded the horizon of life even in that obscene queue. Sunand was the messenger of that freedom and joy ! That was his vocation, education and livelihood !

Suddenly the hungry serpent burst out into a mocking laughter. A handsome youth was coming out of the Exchange Office. A little while ago an obscene commentary had started on the delay in registration of his name. Now on seeing him emerge the angry, exhausted and frustrated queue momentarily turned playful and wayward in the vulgarity of that unwarranted laughter.

The embarrassment of the youth who was dumbfounded at the laughter took it to a higher pitch.

xx xx xx

While registering the name, the staff at the Employment Exchange also put the same question. "What is your profession ?"

Sunand was stupidly thinking of the answer to that question like a dull student taking an examination.

The employee grunted in annoyance. Hearing loud laughter from the queue outside Sunand was wondering if it was aimed at the time he was taking.

As Sunand prepared to leave the employee yelled. "I asked you what your profession is."

"Poet, dreamer", Sunand replied.

"Driver ? What sort of a driver ? Crane, tractor, truck....?", the man asked again.

"Pen driver", Sunand replied sarcastically.

The employee carefully wrote down his name, address and profession and handed him a yellow card. Sunand had neither the time nor the patience to read it.

About a month after that white and gray envelopes from different organizations started arriving at Sunand's residence.

Surama's confidence too was staging a come-back like the return of migratory birds in spring.

Ah ! that poem could not be completed. Within the motley bunch of papers under a burnt–out candle in the table lay the manuscript of an incomplete poem, like the sacrificial goat at the altar of some ancient deity.

Many years ago Surama had entered the room like a dreamy, optimistic lass bearing a cup of steaming hot tea. She did not even have the patience to put it down on the table. The manuscript of the unfinished poem was soaked in the tea which spilled out.

Like the dream girl of that day Surama pressed her head on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. "Do you remember that ?"

"Do I remember what ?", Sunand asked in surprise.

Surama replied in a hurt voice. "That day standing on the beach we had promised the sea to spend a few days in the hotel, half hidden by sand dunes and mangrove forests, that lonely hotel surrounded by rows of mangrove trees. Have you forgotten it by now ?"

Sunand was sipping tea silently.

Stroking his cheeks with her long fingers Surama said "After you get your salary for the first month, we must go to that sea side resort for a whole week."

Sunand was drinking tea like a statue carved out of stone, losing his vision and vitality in the dull cloudy light of the morning.

Surama fished out the grey envelope from under the cot, took out the letter it contained and caressed it, as if it was the message about the good times in store.

What was the appointment conveyed by that letter ?

Sunand took the letter from her hand and glanced through it with sickening curiosity. He had been appointed as a crane–driver in an engineering organization and instructed to join as early as possible. The salary, bonus and provident fund benefits it offered were all attractive.

Sunand, a crane driver !!

He put the letter back in the envelope.

As in the old hopeful days Surana was looking into his eyes with trembling lips and eyes full of optimism.

But Sunand's lips seemed to have turned into stone.

* * *

The Lonely Sky

Nayanpur–a passenger halt station on the trunk rail line. 14–Down Passenger braked and stopped there at five minutes past four in the afternoon.

During the last thirty years the halt time of the 14-Down Passenger had not been altered in the railway time-table.

Penetrating the cloudy mantle of the sky and descending from the thorny peak of the mountain not far from the railway tract, the soft light of the departing afternoon was languidly scattered on the platform; the red tiled roof of the station office, the branches of the trees by the side of the platform, as in the old days thirty years ago.

Sitting in a lonely first class compartment, I kept staring at the bald top of the mountain as if staring at a familiar face in a crowd with recollecting eyes.

Thirty years ago the two curved peaks of the mountain used to appear like the ample breasts of a sleeping beauty. The arched expanse of the mountain was like the outline of her delicate body.

And today the same mountain appeared like the carcass of an elephant.

But the branchless trunk of the banyan tree which had braved a hundred storms and thunder-bolts was still standing there as if to proclaim that life is not a dream but an eternal disillusionment.

Very few used to board the train or get down at that station. Even now the passengers were not many.... There was the same blind beggar whose imploring voice was still replete with acute suffering as it was thirty years ago. As in those days he was sitting in the platform playing an instrument and begging. The bitterness in his life was infinite like the sky. His face too was as clam as the dark lifeless sky. There was not a trace of emotion to contort its placidity.

And there was that village hidden behind the hazy oil painting of mangroves and palms and flanked by paddy fields and marshes–a distance of five miles from Godibanpur station by road but two miles by the short–cut through the fields Karuni Dada the household Accountant of Suna Didi must have come with the bullock cart. But he had not been sighted in the platform. Probably he had not come. The cart too... That is also not necessary. Many travellers returning home were moving alone or in groups through the zigzag tracks in the green fields. I too could do so easily.

The smell of the rain–drenched paddy fields had infused liveliness in the afternoon breeze–like the faint memory of some long–forgotten music. Expanding my nostrils I was inhaling it to find out if the scent of blue water lilies had caressed it like the timid glance of a rustic lass.

Ah ! Neel Kai meaning the blue water lily ! That girl–on that day approaching youth had just touched her tender cheeks like the south wind in early spring.

Kai was her pet name.

One day I had cornered her, caught hold of the *pallav* of her sari and said "Your name should have been Neel Kai."

Like blue water lily was the colour of her body–dusky, radiant and delicate. She was bashful and modest. She too had a humble origin, born in a poor family of Godibanpur; had grown up like the water lily having no access to the joys of life but perennially joyful. Suna Didi, neglected by her own people, could not do without Kai even for a day.

On hearing the name Neel Kai she pulled her sari away and burst into peals of laughter like the waves of moonlight on the still waters of the village pond.

Ah ! that day was pure in the yearning of sinless youth for beauty. I did not make it bestial with the craving of passion for the flesh.

No; Karuni had not come. If he had come we would have met since long. I sat down on a bench in a tea-shop outside the station to prepare myself mentally and physically to walk through the paddy fields.

Only that tea shop had undergone some change during the long interval of three decades. Once it was just an ordinary shop housed in a hut. Now it had become a rural restaurant. On a table stained with decotion were rows of inverted glasses resembling armed soldiers standing with bowed heads and dipped bayonets during the beating of retreat. Tea was being boiled in a black kettle on the coal oven. I was sitting on a bench outside the shop.

Blowing the whistle the passenger train slowly pulled out of the station and was soon out of sight.

With the departure of the train smoke from the chimney of the rice mill nearby emerging through the foliage of mangrove

trees came floating to the platform. As in the past it rose up in a right angle to merge with the dark clouds in the sky.

During all these years the cycle of Time had left untouched the unchangeability of this unchanged environment and had not soiled its green glory with layers of dust. The last refuge of my aimless life was hidden in this unchangeable calmness. The bark of my life, tossed about in the storm, was searching for its anchor under the calm waters–the nectar to revive my benumbed nerves.

xx xx xx

Because of high blood pressure I have been repeatedly advised by doctors and cautioned by Leela not to drink tea. But I could not resist the temptation for a glass of tea while sitting on a bench before the tea shop. Perhaps it was all imaginary but I was feeling that I was inhaling the sweet smell of tea for the first time in the tea brewed in that shop.

Like those receiving the dear one returning from abroad, the surroundings suddenly drew me into them and made me their own. Each turned a blind eye to the imperfections of the other.

Nayanpur station could not see the bitterness of disillusionment in my eyes nor the weariness of fast approaching middle age in the thick lenses I wore.

Sitting on the bench wearing fashionable clothes and sipping tea, I was watching the signal post with the same innocent look of the village lad who used to come to the station to watch the red and green lights of the signal post undaunted by fear of ghosts. Today it was an indication of the end of the journey to a weary traveler; not the attractive gateway to a dream world.

The winding rail track which had now lost itself somewhere in he distant forest dripping with water at the edge of the mountain, once terminated at entrance of the cave in the valley. The wayward boy who had once set out alone to discover that terminus on a hot day following the rail line, not finding any signal post had been gripped by a nameless fear and had returned running. That boy was a now a middle-aged man with high blood pressure who knew the terminus of every path; whose inquisitiveness about everything had been satisfied.

The ploughed fields, bamboo clusters, the muddy track in the jungle of brambles and thorny bushes, the hut of a poor householder and the heap of burnt coal were the permanent abode of Goddess Lakshmi to the village lad who used to haunt them during vacations for experiencing a new thrill every time. Now in every nook and corner of those places were signs of poverty. Yet the place and the man hugged each other like much awaited dear ones.

The owner of the tea-shop who had brewed special tea for me, had been standing there with the glass and calling out in alarm "Babu, your tea." But I had not noticed him.

I took the glass from him, took one sip and put it down on the bench. It was better not to drink tea when doctors had forbidden it. Yet there was a special fragrance in the tea brewed in a village tea shop; an excitement not tasted before.

xx xx xx

I was congratulating myself for selecting that place as a health resort. High blood pressure and numerous ailments associated with it had aggravated over the years. Finally in a sitting of the medical board the remedy was indicated to me– change of place and prayers to the Almighty. A calm, cool attitude in work, detachment about results and total surrender

to Him ! This third stipulation might be suitable for an employee who had retired on a small pension but totally unworkable for managers like me who have their eyes glued to the production chart and distribution graph from dawn to dusk; compare themselves every moment with other business organizations; finish their breakfast in three minutes and business lunch in five minutes and commute to office driving the car at a speed of seventy miles per hour. Change of place and climate were certainly possible.

Thereafter selection of the place became an intricate problem for Leela. She had visualized the happy possibility of visiting different places for providing change of climate to me. My children not only felt the excitement of foot-loose holidays but also expressed it.

But how could Leela or the doctors know that this place was imprinted in my mind as a source of perennial joy like the memory of a stolen kiss ?

If Leela had got any hint from me about choosing this place, she would have secretly advised the doctor to send me to some asylum or sanatorium. And I have no doubt that if the doctors had seen this place, they would have fully agreed with her. Godibanpur was a village in a flood-affected region full of paddy fields to which malaria and bacillary dysentry were endemic.

In the midst of all the commotion and excitement, I had maintained a mysterious silence about choice. I wanted to run away and hide from myself. I was in search of such a place and the waters of a shady lake in the bottomless silence of which I could lose myself like a rock.

Leela first proposed going to one of the hill stations in the Himalayas. Darjiling which she had not yet seen; where

the Kanchanjunga peak could be viewed from the hotel shining like a jewelled crown in the first light of dawn. Dehra Doon too was not bad. Boating in the shady lakes of Dehra Doon in morning and evening was salubrious both for body and mind. Or why not Simla ?

All these were of course cheap and lovely according to colourful advertisements but might be quite ordinary. Leela who knew my taste only too well, concluded her suggestions by saying "If you think that all these are cheap and ordinary then it can be some place in Kashmir–Gulmarg or Manali in Kulu valley. Or without going so far we can go to Solan. Your close friend Colonel Jaffri has a beautiful bungalow at Solan. Mrs. Jaffri was telling me at Bomaby that the bungalow is situated on the road leading to a lonely mountain path and is very near the pine and deodar forest." Leela's fancy was soaring high. For more than four years her saris, fur coat and ornaments of the latest design had been lying packed in the wardrobe pining for the admiring looks of the beauty-loving people in such elite surroundings. Recuperation of my health was just a convenient chance for their exhibition.

But Leela had forgotton that October–November was not the season for a sojourn in hill stations. So the beach was an alternative worth considering. Goaplpur was too drab, Puri too ordinary and Digha was out of question. Then why not go to Pondicherry ?

Leela was a staunch devote of the Pondicherry ashram. It was her firm belief that I would go high in my profession with the blessings of the ashram. To visit the ashram was her cherished desire.

I showed no interest in all this and was silently looking up at the roof and watching the rings of cigarette smoke going up,

wondering when some one would bring out a time-table for trips to the moon and the Mars. But even the worst corner of this green earth would be more attractive than the lifeless deserts of the moon and the Mars. There was also no certainty of getting a return ticket to the earth !

And I would be going round and round in the vaccuum at a speed of thirty thousands miles like a discontented meteor.

I was thinking about climate–change in the vaccuum. There was a vacant look in my eyes.

That vacant, stupid look was the symptom of my ailment. Lack of interest in everything and dissatisfaction in all matters were the symptoms. Insomnia, lack of appetite and lack of enthusiasm in work were other manifestations of that disease.

Leela was alarmed to see that vacant look in my eyes. Without my knowledge she telephoned Dr. Karunakaran.

Everybody became cautious. High pitched voices suddenly became low; foot-steps unnaturally slow and soft. Even my daughter Neela tuned down the radio. Only the loud barks of the Alsatian dog Prince occasionally announced the existence of life in the death–like silence which had enveloped the house.

Dr. Karunakaran listened to my chest. (Did he understand the excitement in my heart ?) measured by B.P, viewed me all over with thoughtful eyes, and exhibiting total indifference towards me, smoked his cigar and made a grating sound on the floor with his shoes.

Finally snuffing the burnt–out cigar in the ash tray he said. "Leela Devi, please leave him alone and give him a long rope. Don't advise or control his movements. Let him to go to some place which suits his taste and spend some time there. Don't try to probe where he is going, what he is talking with him and

when he is coming back. You will see the change on his return. His malady is not mental or physical; it is spiritual. Today man has become a stranger alienated from society and community. He is a total stranger and alien to himself. And absolutely lonely. If he can get up in the morning and bathe in the river with ordinary people chanting hymns and offering water to the sun, pluck flowers from the garden and worship in the temple and discard his burdensome ego in open, expansive surroundings, then he would be a new being. But it is not possible to taste that freedom and humility in a materialistic society obsessed with competition and success. That is why people are now dying of heart disease and blood pressure; not of cholera or such contagious diseases as of old. He lives alone in a prison house of money, power and ego; dies suddenly and silently on a lonely bed or in the hospital. The only prescription for all this is a return from the conscious to the sub-conscious."

Dr. Karunakaran was an experienced physician of national repute. He was also a well-known psychologist. Though many people said that he had no brains, his opinions were highly respected. Lighting another cigar, he said. "Leela Devi, are you afraid of losing him if allowed to go alone ? You women are jealous by nature !"

As Dr. Karunakaran burst out laughing at his own wit I was observing Leela's face. She had not expected or suspected that all her dreams of spreading her wings and visiting different places would be shattered in this manner on the advice of a witty doctor. I would see her face harden.

Ah ! I wanted exactly that–to throw off this disguise; to come out of the shell of consciousness, to break the walls of this prison and vanish into the bottomless pit of the sub-conscious. Even the possibility of being able to do so infused a new enthusiasm into my benumbed sense of being alive.

Leela accepted the doctor's advice. Thereafter she never questioned me about my destination or intention. Daily newspapers were of no use to me for the time being. I did not want the telephone. I wanted to lose and rediscover myself. So I did not deem it necessary to leave behind my address. I did not want to shave in the morning, or wear pressed clothes–meaningless chores of daily life. So when I set out with a small attache packed with only two *dhotis* Leela, though greatly distressed, did not raise any objection lest my ailments aggravate.

xx xx xx

The 7–up had come. The quiet atmosphere in the station area became noisy. The tea-shop owner rushed to the platform with a large kettle of tea and a basket of fried snacks. I receded many years in age and called out "Give me one more cup of tea."

He poured out tea in a glass. The contents of his basket made my mouth water. Ignoring the possibility of infection, I said "Give me two–no. four *baras* with red chillies in them."

He took out four *baras* with fingers resembling the claws of an eagle, put them in a leaf cup and placed it on the bench.

It suddenly occurred to me that I had been starving for a long time. I bit into the *baras* with canine hunger. The red chillies made my eyes water.

Penetrating my tongue and my chest the zest for life (which I had thirty years ago) rejuvenated my nerve-centres with a strange intensity.

"Is this not Mandu ?" Looking up I saw Karuni uncle coming towards me.

Thirty years had left their mark on Karuni uncle's face and body. His face was lined with winkles and his hair was white. His once strong, healthy body was shivering.

He did not appear to be pleased to see me after such a long time "I did not really expect that you would come, Mandu Babu", he said "Why should an engineer who had been to England and Germany remember this village ? Or visit it for an ordinary matter?"

There was no complaint or pique in his voice; only the intensity of grief.

"Because I remember it, I have come running", I said.

"You are not the only one who has stopped coming, Mandu Babu", he said "You are Suna Didi's foster son through distant relationship. You were not legally adopted. But her own brother's son whom she had adopted had not even written to her during the last ten years. He had sent a telegram that he would come by this train but has not come. I had come to receive him. He is an adopted son after all. Her own daughters Kamala and Bimala did not come to see the old lady even once for the last seven years. But for last three days they are camping here with their husbands and children."

I could not understand what he said nor was I interested in it.

"Anyway, let us go. The bullock cart is there" Karuni uncle said.

A layer of the blue mist of autumn had descended on the paddy fields by now.

The sky was bright and blue, like the colour of death, like the deadly poison from the sea of milk.

Ah ! I wanted to drink that poison till I was full to the neck and swoon in eternal sleep.

In the blue sky some floating red clouds were emerging on the horizon. The red was gradually turning into violet which was turning into yellow and the yellow was merging with dark blue.

Looking at them I said "We don't need the cart. If we walk through the fields, it would be only two miles."

Kuruni uncle said in a voice choked with grief. "At least you remember the way to Godibanpur, Mandu Babu. Are you impatient to get there ?"

But I was thinking of something else.

While walking through he zig zag boundaries of the fields Kuruni uncle said "How did you get the news about Suna Didi's illness, Mandu Babu ?"

Just then a red cloud, turning violet, had assumed the from of a freshly bathed rustic bride, with hair reaching down to her waist standing with a water pot on her hip and craning her neck in expectation of her companion.

At one time catching a glimpse of the freshly bathed Neel Kai in the transparency of wet clothes on the bank of Kalinai I had been wildly excited with calf love. A similar wild excitement with a strong push suddenly swayed my benumbed nerves. I was overcome by a strange forgetfulness.

Karuni uncle's questions pulled me out of my forgetfulness. He was saying...

"I put you under oath, Mandu Babu, you must tell me the truth. Who informed you about Suna Didi's health condition ? I have been guarding her properties like a ghost. If each one

were to get his or her share without being entangled in court cases, none will be happier than I. But you know her temperament. Whomsoever she likes instantly becomes her son. She took you as a son; you grew up, got educated and went away. Thereafter, she brought up Ramakanta the son of her brother as her child. Now he is a professor in Patna. Some other foster sons have also surfaced. Then there are Kamala and Bimala, her own daughters. All want immediate partition of the property. Why blame them ? The properties are vast. More than a hundred and fifty acres of land are under self–cultivation. Is there any one who does not yearn for wealth ?"

"No; no one", I replied absent mindedly.

"Exactly, otherwise would I have seen Mandu Babu again in this life ?", Karuni uncle said sharply.

By now the freshly bathed cloud–maiden had hidden her face in a veil of dark cloud. A kite was circling round it.

Thirty years ago Neel Kai too had departed from my life silently, stealthily and an unaccountable agony had got lost in my memory like the faint rays of light at sunset receding beyond the hazy limits of the lonely sky.

To the north of the sandcast plain pushing back the embankment of Kalimai, was a vast mango orchard. The path to Godibanpur village passes through that orchard.

Many years ago on a hot listless midday in the month of Chaitra, a fifteen-year old adolescent boy was sitting under a tree in that mango orchard vacantly staring at the dried–up sandy river-bed of Kalimai. On the ground below were withered mango blossoms scattered by the wind. In the rustling of the fallen flowers, that boy could hear the echo of the silent cries of agony choked within his own breast. The scent of those flowers wafted by the wind was the sorrow of his own heart.

His wait was not for a woman...

His sorrow was not Neel Kai...

Neel Kai was just a desired object...

Many many years later a middle–aged man would have liked to run to a mango–tope at noon in Chaitra if he got a moment's break in his hectic life and feel the withered mango blossoms fall on his head. The hard look in his lack-lustre eyes would soften into a strange agony. In the stunned silence of receding past recollection he would have liked to look around and search for the memory of a special environment in the darkness of oblivion.... But he could not. From a momentary sentiment he would return to a hundred realities of the present. But the hot dry moments of his agonizing life would be flooded with an inexpressible tenderness for a short time.

Today all of a sudden that lost memory had surfaced like a lone star rising at dusk.

On that day at noon the restless cooing of a cuckoo from a branch had just been silenced, but not its echo which had created a wave of agony in every leaf and branch of the trees in the orchard like the fading notes of music.

The boy could not recognize the voice of man in that echo. But standing on the shady zig zag track inside the mango tope, a girl with a pot of water on her graceful hip was bending forward and calling out to the boy "Eh......"

It was Neel kai.

The boy gazed at her for a few moments and then ran away from the place.

Neel Kai might have waited there for some time hoping he would return. But he did not.

Thereafter in the boy's life came the call of the city; the challenge of competition.

Karuni uncle's words brought me down from the mango orchard to the paddy fields of Godibanpur. He was saying, "I know and understand everything, Mandu Babu. Ramakanta's father–your youngest uncle Gopinath Babu–is plotting to deprive. Bimala and Kamala of their legitimate share. But Ramakanta is different and he is not influenced by his father. So he is now trying to involve you cunningly to get what he wants."

Karuni uncle's face had hardened with the gravity of the household manager. But I could not understand what he was saying.

We had left behind the paddy fields. After crossing some straits we would be at the mango orchard. But in its place was a dry plain without tree growth for all the mango trees had been felled. The fonds of the coconut trees in the backyard of Suna Didi's house came within sight. The roof-top of the Gopiballava temple was also before us. In the background of all this was Suna Didi's motherly face. She had been widowed four years after marriage. Her youth passed in fasting and rituals. In her thin weak body ravaged by fasting was a benign motherly soul.

By the time we stepped into the courtyard, the dim evening light was turning to darkness. In that semi-darkness the roof of the elite and ancient house of Suna Didi appeared like the outline of some distant hill. The smell of the flowers of cucumber and other vegetables and the very familiar earth of my adolescence folded me in a tight embrace like a loving mother.

Ah ! as soon as the evening lamp was put out I would sleep under that roof comfortably. Next morning I would

watch the sun rise behind the banyan tree. I would certainly spend the next evening and night in that house. There was no sorrow or suspicion there; only peace and comfort; playfulness and unalloyed bliss and the complacency of trust. It would not be necessary to take refuge in drinks to overcome insomnia or to religious discourses to drive out nagging doubts and suspicion.

But who were those people in the courtyard ? The bustle of life had been silenced since long in the courtyard of Choudhary Mansion as Suna Didi's house was popularly known. She alone had been guarding the lonely, cheerless house of the Choudhary family like a ghost.

The courtyard faced the temple of Gopiballav and was deserted and unused except on festival days.

But now I saw a group of people sitting there on a carpet. One of them was obviously a VIP. He was reclining on a thick cushion and smoking a *hookah*. "Who are these people?" I asked Karuni uncle.

"The man reclining on the cushion is Kishore Babu, Bimala's husband. He is a businessman in Calcutta." I had heard about Kishore but since I was abroad at the time of Bimala's marriage. I had not met him till then.

From the courtyard Kishore Babu called Karuni and asked him "Who is with you, Karuni Babu ? Then Ramakanta has come !"

Karuni said "Ramakanta Babu has not come by this train. He may come by the night train. This is Mandu Babu, a closely related nephew of mother. He has grown up in this house."

"Then he is another adopted son of mother ! You too could search him out at the right time", Kishroe Babu commented.

The high veranda before us appeared like the wall of a fort. It had been constructed with stone long ago to protect the house from floods. I suddenly recalled that there were eight steps from the road to the veranda–a number I remembered well.

I paid no heed to what Kishore was saying. I was mentally counting the steps one by one while climbing.

The first suite used to be mostly vacant. Guests who came unexpectedly during festival occasions used to be accommodated in that. Karuni uncle used a portion of it as his office. But many people had gathered there today. Cries of children, shouts of servants sounded from every room. Karuni uncle said "Kamala has eight childen; Bimala has four; then there are their husbands and attendants. How can all of them be accommodated in one suite ? Mother is in the other suite." He led me through a corridor to an inner suite saying "Be careful, Mandu Babu."

Some one came running from the inner suite and collided with Karuni uncle in the dark passage. "Is it Karuni Babu ?", he said in a vexed tone "Who has gone to fetch the doctor ? The bottle of Coramin mixture slipped from Kamala's hand and fell down. Some Coramin injections are urgently required. Now she is sweating profusely after remission of the temperature."

"What can I do ?", Karuni uncle said. "I am on the move all day. Anyway there is remission of temperature and mother is cured of one ailment."

"Whatever it is, some one should go to the doctor at once." said the man as he took a turn and left.

Temperature–doctor–coramin. I was bewildered "What is all this ?", I asked Karuni uncle.

"You are asking me as if you know nothing", he said. "Suna Didi is down with fever for one month. Doctors cannot decide whether it is due to typhoid or malaria. There was talk of shifting her to the medical college hospital. But she is obstinately refusing to move out of the house."

The suite was as large as the shed for an elephant I used to know every speck of dust in it. Suna Didi's pooja room where she used to spend hours both in the morning and evening; from which would emanate the smell of incense, sandalwood paste and flowers, was now locked. There was the room on the western side from which I used to stare at the distant forests in the afternoon.

xx xx xx

The crescent moon had risen above the tops of coconut trees. The faint moonlight had fallen in a corner of the room like a handful of withered blossoms.

Inside the room was an unnatural silliness. Karuni uncle said "Mother is in this room."

A lantern shed faint light in a corner of the room. Violent cough suddenly shook up the still surroundings with the terror of death.

Propped up with pillows Suna Didi was sitting on the same teak bedstead, lying on which she had been guarding her loveless world like a ghost. Her dim listless eyes, staring ahead were devoid of the vitality of life. On a stool near the bed was a framed picture of Jagannath, some tulsi leaves, a handful of sanctified dried rice and a pot of Ganga water. Suna Didi was gazing at a photo of her late husband on the wall which appeared exceptionally radiant. The face was young and aristocratic.

"Mother, Mandu Babu has come to see you", Karuni uncle said in a loud voice.

Did she hear it ? There was not the faintest sign of life in her eyes.

"Mother, your Mandu Babu is standing here", Karuni uncle said raising his voice still further.

Still no sign of recognition in the face ravaged by fasting. Her unblinking eyes continued to stare fixedly from their sockets as if they were of marble.

Feeling distressed I came out of the room. Karuni uncle was still standing there and calling "Mother, mother."

While I was proceeding to the suite outside, some one was talking about me in the dark passage. "You should have been with your mother now. Karuni Babu has taken your cousin Mandu to her room. All our efforts would be in vain if he were to take her thumb impression on a will or a deed of adoption." I heard the jingling of bangles as a woman proceeded hurriedly to Suna Didi's room. Was it Kamala or Bimala ? It made no difference who it was.

Myraid sweet memories of an environment overflowing with love had drawn me to this place with the temptation of a refuge. Now I was being pushed out by several hands.

I came out. No one was in the courtyard. Probably all had retreated to their own camps for secret consultation or to exhibit their eagerness to nurse Suna Didi.

I descended the steps, involuntarily counting them one by one.

A woman was coming out of Gopiballav temple holding a lamp. A part of her face was visible in the light shed by of the lamp. She was haggard and wore no bangles or ornaments.

"Who is it ? Neel Kai ?, I cried in alarm.

She dropped the lamp. In the faint moonlight everything appeared hazy like the memory of a dream.

"Neel kai !" I called again.

But Neel Kai was not there to respond.

Inside the house Kamala and Bimala had started wailing loudly. Suna Didi had passed away.

There was the mail train at 10.00 PM for returning to the city. I could easily get back to the station even in darkness; I still remembered the path very well.

The red signal light of the station was visible beyond the mango-tope, like the blood-shot eye of the ogre from whom I had fled to hide myself.

I moved towards it like one in a trance.

Some one called "Eh ?"

I looked back. No. There was none.

Far behind two leafless branches on the stump of a tree had created the illusion of a woman with disheveled hair in the hazy moonlight. She was rushing forward to gather me in her out-stretched arms.



Still the Sky Was Blue

The carbon seemed to have worn off from the fan.

The fan, suspended from the ceiling, was letting out a strange sound as it rotated, like a bird with broken wings. It was producing more noise than breeze.

It was a road-side restaurant in a slum of the city. Not many customers were there. On the table were plates with picked bones and remnants of food, forks and knives; all together creating an environment resembling a cremation field or a deserted battlefield.

Amitabh was sitting at a table on which had spilled some drops of milk attracting flies.

After tasting the milk the flies would take a break and rest on a sensitive spot on the bridge of his nose. Amitabh was trying to drive them away. Waving his arms, shaking the newspaper in his hand and sometimes getting up from the chair restlessly and resuming his seat after a few moments.

Amitabh was the special political correspondent of the paper "Swadesh Mitra". But he was not reading the paper. From behind the paper he held before his eyes, he was observing the movements of Hani Master, the tailor, sitting on a stool in a

tailoring shop on the other side of the road. Even the slightest movement of his limbs, the anxious and alert glances he cast on the road and the very casual manner in which he talked to any customer or visitor who dropped in unexpectedly were all being observed and analyzed by Amitabh and stored in his memory.

From the depth of the dingy dark "Master Cutting and Tailoring Shop" (which looked like Ali Baba's cave) Hani Master too was observing the owner of the restaurant sitting in the veranda and Amitabh sitting inside.

Adjacent to the tailoring shop was the tomb of a pir (Muslim saint). By its side an old silk-cotton tree with leafless branches laden with flowers and extending to the road, appeared like a Japanese painting against the background of the blue sky. Amitabh was glancing at it occasionally for inspiration and Hani Master was doing the same in search of the origin of his life.

Hani Master had seen that silk-cotton tree looking exactly like that in his childhood. In his life full of doubt, uncertainty, apprehension and distress, that silk-cotton tree had been the only symbol of dependability and certainty. Now like a grieving neighbour the leafless tree was extending its tender touch towards him after his long exile of eighteen years. Sometimes before Hani Master's dim eyes would appear the picture of his father Yusuf Mirza, wife Asapari Jaan and sons Ramzan and Usman. All of them had drifted away he knew not where. But on every leafless branch of that tree there were countless red flowers.

The once famous "Master Cutting and Tailoring" was now housed in a slum like some much used furniture dumped in a corner. Even in that small town people's tastes and contacts had undergone a great change in a subtle manner during the

last eighteen years to which Hani Master could not find a clue. Still after his long absence from the place, the familiar town was very dear to him as if it were the very origin of his life.

A red-faced monkey tethered to a pole suddenly let out shrill cries displaying all his teeth. It was his habit to pounce upon any visitor who was a stranger. Hearing his cries Hani Master peeped out stealthily like a tortoise creeping out of its shell.

A small-built man wearing a soiled pyjama and torn slippers with something wrapped in paper under his arm was climbing into the veranda. Hani Master frowned. Surely the unfortunate man had come to patch or repair his torn dress or to reduce its length or width. Probably he had to face an interview in a day or two and had to make his dress presentable. Hani Master was getting many such orders these days. That was not the work he liked. But that was what came his way and nobody came to "Master Cutting and Tailoring" with any big orders.

The new comer had vanished into the shop and Amitabh who had been watching him lit a cigarette. His eyes brightened at the success of a casual investigation. But just then a pair of flies landed on the bridge of his nose and flinging down the paper in his hand, he stood up in annoyance.

Ah ! flies and spies had invaded every nook and corner of the country. In that vexatious and unhealthy environment he had got the introductory sentence to the column he was going to write for "Swadesh Mitra" "Public health and political health of the city endangered by flies and spies." The sharpness and novelty of the metaphor he had selected would appeal to the readers. Visualizing their reaction Amitabh temporarily forgot Hani Master and his visitor.

Still that man had not come out of the shop. Amitabh wondered if some conspiracy was being hatched by him and Hani Master. Hani Master's pet monkey which usually sat quietly near the pole to which he was tethered was jumping up and down and making funny sounds and gestures like a joker in a circus.

Eighteen years ago a four-feet high goat used to be tethered at the place where the monkey wearing a red jacket, was now tethered. It had a pair of horns pointing upwards like the branches on a tree trunk and a tuft of hair under the dewlap as long as the beard of a Chinese monk. Its drooping ears reached down to the dewlap. Tethered to a pillar in the narrow veranda of "Master Cutting and Tailoring" it would be chewing cud with its eyes closed while Hani Master would be plying the sewing machine crooning the popular songs from the latest movies running in the town. Sometimes he would stop plying the machine lost in singing and sometimes stop singing and concentrate on his craft. Customers used to throng the shop and the clothes he cut had a special finish.

There was no similarity between the healthy, strong and well-dressed Hani Master of those days and the man who sat in the shop now, unwanted and neglected by the public. His head was bald and his eyes sunken. He did not darken his eyes with *suruma* or exude the scent of *attar* as in the past. His once muscular body was emaciated and his beard once tended so carefully, was grey. Some teeth had fallen making his face appear shapeless.

xx xx xx

How the name of Hanif Mirza bestowed on him by his father became Hani Master is not known. Probably impressed by his excellence in tailoring some discerning customer had

suffixed the title of 'master' to his name. In course of time Hanif Master became "Hani Master"! But in that name was packed the esteem and affection of a lifetime towards an individual. At all places from the clubs in the slum to the mansions of fastidious customers, he was Hani Master to everybody.

During Dussera and Diwali when the Hindus in his colony took out the idol for immersion, the procession would not move if Hani Master was not at the lead. Hani Master leading the procession clad in a striped *dhoti* and a thin loose shirt with floral pattern, a pink georgette turban on his head, a garland of yellow marigolds round his neck and a short silver-capped staff on his hand was still remembered by some people of the colony.

xx xx xx

After some time Hani Master emerged from the depth of the dark cave, first looked at the hot midday sky of *chaitra* and then at both sides of the deserted lane and then returned to that cave. The monkey which had been dozing jumped up again and tried to attract his attention by letting out shrill cries and prancing about like a traffic constable.

The strange customer was certainly another spy and had come with some secret intelligence, so interpreted Amitabh within himself. No decent man of taste would come to that dirty shop to get his clothes stitched. He had probably brought a wireless transistor or hand-grenade or had collected some secret information about the city. Otherwise why should Hani Master stand on the veranda of his shop, with a vacant look like a guilty person ?

Two constables, returning from traffic duty, passed by the turning in the lane grating their boots on the pavement as if all their ego and hauteur had settled on their booted feet. On seeing them, Hani Master withdrew into the shop and closed the door.

Highly pleased with himself for his success in making a new discovery, Amitabh lighted a cigarette. Within the shop Hani Master had started plying his machine. The sound of the machine shattered the silence of the road on which there was hardly any traffic.

Eighteen years ago...

After the death of his wife Asapari Jaan, Hani Mastrer's ever-cheerful and carefree temperament had suddenly turned melancholy and detached. His sons Ramzan and Usman had been working at Calcutta as *khalasis*, but for a long time there was no information about their whereabouts. From some neighbours returning from Calcutta he heard that they had been killed.

Those terrible days of intense communal hatred. Even recalling them sent shivers through the body. But in those days the eyes of the majority had not become lifeless and indifferent with cold hatred like marble eyes nor were the eyes of the minorly moist with fear and distress like a swamp under cover of shadows or pale with concealed hatred like the cover of ash over burning embers. This small city had not become intolerable and indescribable like gathering clouds awaiting the thunder-bolt. The recollection of those days would make Hani Master burn and shudder with restlessness.

One day the customers stopped coming. Occasionally some people of his own community would come for getting some T-shirt or half-pants stitched but he would throw them out and say–such work is not for me; there are other shops and other tailors for it. Young men in the colony no longer gathered in the veranda of his shop or the *Kawwali* club in the evening or played cards in the lane under the electric lamp.

Everywhere in Calcutta, Kanpur, Delhi, Bombay-there was blood-bath. In that boiling, bubbling sea that small city had remained detached like an island. Yet battered by its poisonous waves its main root had been shaken.

Every moment was agonizing fraught with fear and suspicion, every night sleepless and terrifying and in every hour there was readiness for attack and defence.

Even a match-stick would have made that heap of dynamite to explode into a volcanic eruption. The volcano would cool down after eruption. But the apprehension that it may erupt at any moment was more agonizing than the explosion itself.

Every moment was restless with tension and fear-there may be attack today at mid-night or tomorrow. And everywhere one saw innumerable glass eyes like the burning eyes of a man-eater at night.

Ah ! Can man's eye be so terrifying ?

Did he not know what Pakistan was ?

By now he had seen the face of Pakistan with his own eyes. He had realized that Pakistan was a bloody gamble created to appease some power–hungry bigots with muscle power. But at that time Pakistan was the new Mecca on the earth for every Muslim. Under such circumstances Hani Master had set out for Pakistan with the sale proceeds of his singer machine after lighting an incense stick at the tomb of the pir under the nodding silk-cotton tree.

The sound of the machine had been silenced. Hani Master came out and stood in the veranda of the shop gazing at the road, as if anxiously waiting for some one.

Screened by the newspaper Amitabh had been exhaling rings of smoke and interpreting every action and demeanour of

Hani Master and inventing new theories to establish that he was a spy.

Amitabh's thought process was interrupted when the sound of the sewing machine suddenly stopped. He lighted another cigarette and come out.

Just then the owner of the restaurant sitting at the entrance had switched on the radio.

From the radio came the song announcing the beginning of the midday programme. Seeing Amitabh coming that way he got up from his chair and asked him in a whisper "How many Pakistanis have come to our town with rifles and hand grenades ?"

Amitabh smiled myseriously glanced at the shop and said "A Pakistani spy is standing there right in front of you."

Some textile vendors from East Pakistan had put down heir loads and were sitting on the veranda of Hani Master's shop, wiping the sweat off their bodies.

The silk-cotton tree which had been spreading its bare branches all these days above the ground adjacent to the shop of Hani Master was cracking under the weight of its red fruits. Like a single colourful moment in a cheerless and monotonous life, there was a rain of the red shells of the fruits all over the pir's tomb and around it. Two fakirs who appeared to be foreigners were preparing to offer namaz at the pir's tomb. The tomb neglected for years now appeared to be well cared for having received a coat of lime after the arrival of Hani Master. At the top of the tomb was flying a green flag with a crescent moon stamped on it. A few earthen incense-stick holders and some incense leaves were scattered on the ground.

"See that flag with the national emblem of Pakistan", Amitabh said.

Hani Master washed his hands and feet and was heading towards the tomb for namaz. After namaz the two fakirs would probably join the group on the veranda. It was clear from their dress that they were not local residents. The long black dress they wore, the string of multi-coloured glass beads round their necks, their shoulder–length unkempt hair and disheveled beards–the combined effect of all these had shrouded their faces in mystery.

Staring at the tomb, the owner of the restaurant was thinking of the many vain attempts of Amitabh to grab and merge that ground with a plot of his own, after Hani Maser had left the place. It was the Hindus of the colony who thwarted his attempts. The tomb of the pir was sacred to them too ! Then Hani Master came back when least expected and opened his tailoring shop.

The owner of the restaurant was also an important spokesman of a political party. The voting pattern in the colony would be decided in that very restaurant during elections.

"The Government takes no notice", he said in a complaining voice. "Journalists are also silent. Now spies are on the road and within houses too ! You know hand grenades, wireless sets and rifles are all kept ready in the shop of Hani Master. They will start the game on getting the signal."

"That is exactly my suspicion too," Amitabh said exhaling smoke from the cigarette in a grave manner. "Otherwise why should he suddenly leave Pakistan and come here ? You must keep a vigilant eye on this dangerous character."

The dangerous character Hani Master had finished saying namaz by this time and was silently coming down from the tomb like a shadow close behind the two fakirs and proceeding to his shop.

Amitabh got up on the scooter he had left outside the restaurant, started it and driving it furiously, was soon out of sight.

xx xx xx

Lulled by the sounds of the hair-clipper and the gentle massage by expert hands, Amitabh had started nodding. His skin coming in contact with the sharp edge of the scissors when the barber put down the clipper and started trimming the hair with scissors, Amitabh was rudely woken up by a searing pain and sat upright in the chair.

Amitabh was fascinated to see his own image in the mirror. He was comparing his own hair style with the "Oxford cut" hair style of the handsome man in tie and jacket whose picture was on the wall of the saloon.

Amitabh was always afraid to face himself. So he seldom used a mirror for shaving or combing his hair. His fingers seemed to have a sixth sense. So he could set his hair by merely passing his fingers over them and locate even he smallest bristle on his chin which the razor had missed.

In the mirror his eyes appeared like two balls of fire–cruel, hungry and burning-dating back to the pre-historic age. Their cruelty was emphasized by the deep dark lines under them. The crow's feet at the corners had made them harsh beyond description.

But there was a time when those eyes were the most attractive features of his personality.

Then Nandita had said kissing those now sunken eyes and wrinkled eye lids. "Your eyes are not eyes; but brimming bowls of wine."

Lotion was being applied to his neck and it burned the skin where it had come in contact with the razor.

The memory of Nandita too was like the touch of the razor on a tender, sensitive spot.

Many years ago, on one night....

The city slept; the roads were still and deserted. The pale moon and an electric bulb in a lamp-post were shedding light on the sky and the road. In the dim light Amitabh kept moving from one side of the lonely road to the other like the shadow of a ghost, frequently glancing in the direction of a dark room in the upper story of an apartment in front.

That day Nandita had suddenly cancelled her programme to go out with him at the last minute, pretending to have a headache. Amitabh had come with visions of a sickly Nandita, intending to stroke her pale cheeks and enquire tenderly "How are you, Nandita ?"

But as he reached the head of the stairs, taking the steps two at a time, some one threw him down with a strong push.

There was strong lock on the door of the flat.

Nandita's neighbour, an operator in the Telephone Exchange, going out on duty, saw Amitabh standing dumbfounded on the stairs and said with a meaningful smile.

"Nandita has just gone out."

Amitabh could not muster up courage to ask her whether Nandita had gone out alone or with somebody.

A clock in a house by the side of the road struck two, momentarily shattering the silence of the night. A long black automobile slowly drove up to the other side of the road and braked. Amitabh could hear the pounding of his own heart in the dead silence of the night.

Nandita got down from the car. She was wearing a blue sari, a colour Amitabh had selected to heighten the dusky softness of her body and make it radiant with a strange beauty.

The rich and fashionable cricket player Dulal Ismail emerged from the car after Nandita. His tall graceful body and French-cut beard could be easily recognized even in the dim moonlight.

"Good night", Ismail said in a weay tone.

Happy and smiling Nandita yawned and said softly, "Good morning."

It was past 2 p.m.

Ismail too smiled and said "Good morning."

Ismail's car driven at the speed of a hurricane took a turn and was soon out of sight.

The lights were switched on in Nandita's flat.

Amitabh went up to the stairs and ascended, with the intention to go and knock at her door. But he came back slowly like one in a trance.

The barber had been waiting to ply the scissors over his left ear. But lost in oblivion Amitabh was sitting like a statue without turning his head. The barber turned his face to one side pulling him out of his reverie.

"I want a closed–cropped cut", Amitabh said.

On the wall to the left was pinned a picture cut out from a film magazine; the picture of an actress lying languidly curled up on the grass with her face pressed on the soft green grass.

Amitabh withdrew his gaze from the picture when the hair-cutter shifted his operations to the cheeks.

xx xx xx

The speech of some leader was being broadcast on the radio "Call for peace, friendship and goodwill..." Futile repetition of some words about peace, friendship and goodwill already uttered a million times before.

Before Amitabh's eye appeared the picture of a disgruntled youth roaming about with a vacant look on the roads of metropolitan cities, outside air-conditioned restaurants, cinema houses and super–markets.

Ah !... Layers and layers of immeasurable guilt, futility, frustration, restlessness, thick-skinned vanity and sin are being piled up in life today. Only war, revolution and blood-bath can wipe out all these ! Only a volcanic eruption can burn these heaps to rubbish and make life and environment pure and innocent once again.

"The history of peace and friendship is the history of India", the leader was saying.

"Nonsense; utter nonsense; Peace means compromise with falsehood and exploitation and coexistence with plunder", Amitabh shricked like a mad man.

The endless futility of his own life suddenly assumed global dimensions in Amitabh's eyes. He wanted to clear up all the futility and misery in life by a violent explosion.

The barber was staring at him in amazement and asking him whether his beard should be trimmed.

xx xx xx

The night had become still and silent. A tiny, shapeless moon was floating on the sky patterned with scattered clouds.

Sitting under the silk-cotton tree near the pir's tomb Suleiman fakir was playing a stringed instrument. Some people

had gathered in a small room like a pigeon-hole curtained with sack cloth at the back of Hani Master's shop. Their whispered talk was sometimes audible in the stillness of the night. Hani Master was sitting on a stool outside the shop. Some people were going in and coming out of that shop moving stealthily like shadows.

Two constables on beat passed that way grating their heavy boots on the ground making a lot of noise. Hani Master got up, went in and watched them cautionsly till they had passed the turning of the lane and were lost sight of A lantern inside the shop shed light on the road.

From the instrument of Suleiman emanated a strange mournful tune like a hot heart-rending sigh going round and round, searching and pining for death in the tresses of the loved one.

Like that disturbing tune Hani Master too had been searching in vain for something for the past eighteen years in many strange cities and highways in East Pakistan and the dark lanes and by-lanes of this small town. Dacca, Sultan Ganj, Khulna, Jessore, Narayan Ganj, Chittagong... He had been searching for the roots of his life in many cities after the partition of the country. He had got shelter in some places, support in others but that main root of his life–nowhere ! Everywhere he had felt lonely, forlorn and unwanted–a stranger newly arrived at the place. The very name Hani Master had been the subject of wit and ridicule. On top of that his pronunciation of Urdu and East Pakistani Bengali had made him the odd one out. The Hani Master who once used to be regarded as an institution had become a neglected and ridiculed non-entity in the new surroundings and society. Further, his cutting which used to be admired as artistic and sophisticated was also rejected as rustic and uncouth.

To eke out a living Hani Master became a textile vendor and roamed around in many regions with a bundle of clothes on his back. Wandering like that he crossed the East Bengal border and came to Assam and from Assam to West Bengal. From there he sneaked into this town. He had no passport or visa. Further, he did not know in which country he could claim citizenship. He had come fearfully, stealthily like a hunted animal, hiding during day and walking at night; a dry leaf tossed about by the wind.

Since then he would be terrified at the sight of any government official or the police. In his subconscious was buried a nameless apprehension and terror. To look around cautiously had become a habit with him as if he was living in disguise.

Hani Master had been thinking that the roots of his life ware in this country; in this soil. Who banished him from this country and condemned him to live in disguise here? Who partitioned this country?

These were intricate, maddening questions to which he could not find any answer. It was a conspiracy, all along, so he thought. But that day heaving a sigh of relief he was musing that whatever had happened was past; such a dense dark night, such a sky studded with stars, such cool, soothing breeze, could not be found anywhere else.

This was his motherland; his heritage.

xx xx xx

A vivid description of the Pakistan espionage network in the city and Hani Master, the mastermind behind it, couched in the language of hatred and violence appeared in big bold letters under banner headlines in the morning edition of "Swadesh Mitra" Amitabh had started his report with the same sentence

which had been formed in his mind when he was sitting in the restaurant, fanning away the flies. "Public health and political health of the city endangered by flies and spies." The conspiracy hatched by the spies, their intrusion without visa and passport; their keeping in readiness hand grenades and other lethal weapons, the luke-warm attitude of the administration and the threat to national security were all packed in tha report.

This was the topic discussed by thousands at the bus stand, in the restaurants, clubs, offices, houses everywhere.

The shop of Hani Master was closed since morning.

Hani Master had fled from the place before armed police in a wireless-equipped van arrived at "Master Cutting and Tailoring." He was not unaware of the punishment that would follow if caught without visa and passport in foreign lands.

He had left at the crack of dawn when the cocks started crowing in the Muslim colony; before the stars had set in the sky.

He was the son of that soil; like the silk-cotton tree he too had grown up under that generous, expansive sky. Every branch of the silk-cotton tree was laden with innumerable bunches of red flowers. But he was bidding good-bye to that place; stealthily cautiously like the dacoit striking at night–an art in which he had become expert over the last eighteen years. Even the red-faced monkey was not there.

Relying on a newspaper report the shop was raided in the presence of the police, a magistrate and people drawn by idle curiosity and was searched thoroughly. An old sewing machine, cut pieces of cloth, balls of thread, slips of paper indicating measurements of clothes given for stitching and in a suspicious looking bundle lying in a corner some torn pants

and shirts given for mending-these were all that could be recovered. But no hand–grenade, transistor or secret communication.

Amitabh had an explanation. "Would any one leave these things behind ?"

And what further proof was required about Hani Master being a spy than his sudden disappearance on getting scent of the police raid ? This was what the owner of the restaurant kept telling everybody with the triumphant smile of one who knows.

Hani Master had become famous and mysterious overnight like a character in some detective novel of Edgar Wallace or Agatha Christie.

Thereafter, far from the city a strange fakir could be seen moving on the roads in the villages. He had merged with the surroundings so well that he did not attract any attention. A red–faced monkey was with him and he had a drum in his hands. When he beat the drum the monkey would dance, fawn and beg with folded palms. The blue sky above and the brown earth below were his shelter. His friend and companion was the red-faced monkey.

The sky was still blue here; the earth was still loving and the shade of the trees still dense. Who banished him from this country ? Deprived him of the right to live here ? Pushed him out like a pawn in a game of chess ?

These are questions unanswered for ever.

Hani Master was not getting any answer to those questions even then.





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